Nestled within our trillions of cells lie complete copies of our unique genetic instructions, encoded in our DNA. This biological manual, our genetic “Torah,” is passed along every time one cell divides to form two, starting shortly after sperm meets egg.

*Our Genetic Torah, Ricki Lewis and Francis Barany, Page 15*
Wine Song for Spring

The cold season has slipped away like a Shadow. Its rains already gone, its Chariots and its horsemen. Now the Sun, in its ordained circuit, is at the Sign of the Ram, like a King reclining On the couch. The hills have put on Turbans of flowers, and the plain has Robed itself in tunics of grass and herbs; It greets our nostrils with the incense Hidden in its bosom all winter long.

Give me the cup that will enthrone my Joy and banish sorrow from my heart. The wine is hot with anger; temper its Fierce fire with my tears. Beware of Fortune: her favours are like the Venom of serpents, spiced with honey. But let your soul deceive itself and Accept her goodness in the morning, Even though you know that she will be Treacherous at night.

Drink all day long, until the day wanes And the sun coats its silver with gold; And all night long, until the night flies Like a Moor, while the hand of dawn Grips its heel.

Moses Ibn Ezra (c. 1055 – after 1135), born in Granada, was a poet and theoretician. He wrote The Book of Conversations and Memories, a history of Andalusian Hebrew poetry. In addition to long secular poems, shorter love poems and meditations, he composed many liturgical poems, including deeply moving selihot.
Shavuot commemorates one of the most important theological moments of Jewish life, the receiving of Torah at Sinai. However, Shavuot may be our most neglected festival. Since this holiday does not have any experiential rituals like a Seder or the building of a sukkah, it has not captured the imagination or attention of our community. Shavuot is worth another look, for its significance offers much in the way of renewing our own faith.

Shavuot began, like most major festivals, primarily as an agricultural holiday. A late spring festival, Shavuot marks the gathering of the first fruits of the harvest. These bikkurim, or offerings, are brought to God in thanksgiving and with hope for an abundant harvest throughout the summer. This agricultural practice also has a spiritual dimension: We are to bring the first, and best, of ourselves when we want to show gratitude and appreciation, not that which is leftover.

The harvest festival is reflected in the Book of Ruth, the traditional text read on Shavuot. Ruth is the story of a Moabite woman who marries into an Israelite family. After her husband dies, she refuses to leave Naomi, her mother-in-law, and pledges loyalty not only to her, but to her people, her faith and her God. Ruth is held up as the paradigmatic convert to Judaism. Just as I am inspired by every story about people who choose to embrace Judaism, this central text of Shavuot renews our faith by setting an example of ultimate loyalty and devotion.

In addition to the agricultural significance of the holiday, Shavuot also marks the historical moment when we received Torah at Sinai. However, we are told not to remember this as ancient history, but to recreate the moment of Sinai in each of our lives, by continuing to affirm Torah. It is said that the covenant is a covenant for all generations, which means that each generation must take on that covenant anew, in some ways following the model of Ruth. While Ruth had to leave her ancestral faith to accept the Torah of our people, in contrast to born Jews who do not, she reflects a reality in our world today — that we are all Jews by Choice.

We live in a time of unprecedented freedom and opportunity, which means that Jews in America today have the freedom to study and embrace Torah, but also NOT to. Every time I pass the Torah through the generations to a new Bar or Bat Mitzvah, each time I bless a confirmand, I am aware that their embrace of Torah is an affirmation of choosing Judaism.

Central Synagogue began Confirmation services in 1868 and, to this day, we continue to hold them for our tenth graders on Erev Shavuot. It renews my faith every year to watch each of these students, between the ages of three and five, to the study of Torah at Shavuot. The Reform movement, in its early years, also understood the fundamental significance of renewing our commitment to Torah at Shavuot and began the practice of Confirmation for students, generally in the tenth grade. The Reform movement felt that students at this age were better able to make a more mature commitment and conscious choice.

Central Synagogue began Confirmation services in 1868 and, to this day, we continue to hold them for our tenth graders on Erev Shavuot. It renews my faith every year to watch each of these students, between the ages of three and five, to the study of Torah at Shavuot. The Reform movement, in its early years, also understood the fundamental significance of renewing our commitment to Torah at Shavuot and began the practice of Confirmation for students, generally in the tenth grade. The Reform movement felt that students at this age were better able to make a more mature commitment and conscious choice.

Central Synagogue began Confirmation services in 1868 and, to this day, we continue to hold them for our tenth graders on Erev Shavuot. It renews my faith every year to watch each of these students, between the ages of three and five, to the study of Torah at Shavuot. The Reform movement, in its early years, also understood the fundamental significance of renewing our commitment to Torah at Shavuot and began the practice of Confirmation for students, generally in the tenth grade. The Reform movement felt that students at this age were better able to make a more mature commitment and conscious choice.

Central Synagogue began Confirmation services in 1868 and, to this day, we continue to hold them for our tenth graders on Erev Shavuot. It renews my faith every year to watch each of these students, between the ages of three and five, to the study of Torah at Shavuot. The Reform movement, in its early years, also understood the fundamental significance of renewing our commitment to Torah at Shavuot and began the practice of Confirmation for students, generally in the tenth grade. The Reform movement felt that students at this age were better able to make a more mature commitment and conscious choice.
first went to Israel in 1961, as a young associate at Kuhn Loeb, to work on the external financing of an Israeli bank; it was the first public offering of an Israeli company in the international capital markets. My initial impressions of Israel were not all that positive.

1961 was the year that Ben Gurion was traveling around Europe insisting that you could not be a good Jew unless you made aliya. Wherever I went I was proselytized, whether at the Dead Sea Works (now Israel Chemicals) or over lunch at a refinery on the shores of Lake Tiberius, despite my making it quite clear that, married and with family, I had no intention of moving to Israel. In addition, I had an encounter with an abrasive shopkeeper in Jerusalem who accused me of trying to bargain with her, when all I wanted was to buy a Kiddush cup for a friend at the price she had quoted him. Her behavior epitomized to me all the coldness, unfriendliness and stubbornness of Jerusalem.

I was absolutely wrong. The following year I went back to Israel to arrange a financing for another Israeli bank. Late one afternoon, as I was walking back to my hotel along what is still today, one of the most crowded streets in Tel Aviv, I found myself intently studying people’s faces. I did not know why, but it occurred to me that I was looking for family. Then I stood stock still, quite literally struck by the idea that I was actually looking for myself.

In 1972, I began a long involvement with the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, becoming its chairman in 1983, only to discover that the University was essentially bankrupt. It took the next nine years of my tenure to turn the tide from red to black, but it has remained in the black ever since.

On the business side, I continued the work with the banks I had begun in the 1960’s. But there is a vast difference between Israel’s economy in those days and that of today. Then it was still a country of pioneers with a small economy, demand consistently exceeding supply, and there was chronic over-employment, leading to inflation and a disregard for efficiency; there was a cultural disdain for profits as somehow unethical. The country persisted in ignoring these issues in the belief that a certain amount of inflation was healthy, and efficiency did not matter as long as everyone worked. But inflation kept creeping up steadily, finally reaching a catastrophic 500 % +/- in the early 80’s. In addition, Israel’s industry was basically owned either by Histadrut (the Federation of Labor), the government or the banks. The old socialist attitude of disregard for efficiency and profits was still operative.

Following the 1973 war, the subsequent concerns about “petro dollars” and the Arab boycott of firms doing business with Israel, the few other international bankers who had been intermittently active in Israel left, and I was the only remaining international investment banker. Business was difficult; we...
(Kuhn Loeb and Lehman merged at the end of 1977) financed the Hadera power plant and managed a substantial number of Israeli government or government-related debt offerings over the years, but there were no equity offerings and not much foreign investment. By 1983, Israel was in the midst of a major financial crisis; the major Israeli banks experienced such a severe crisis that they were nationalized by the government. The crisis lasted for several years and by 1985-86 a series of draconian reforms, despite causing a number of businesses to go under, nevertheless reduced inflation dramatically, stabilized Israel’s currency and formulated comprehensible and stable tax policies.

These latter two points were extremely important. Strategic and financial investors are generally willing to assess business risks on their own, but are reluctant to invest where the risks are entirely in the control of others. Tax policy and currency stability are two such risks.

The reforms worked and, in 1987, Lehman was able to manage successfully two corporate equity offerings. The result was in the case of one of them, the US $33 million offering for Teva Pharmaceuticals, extraordinary and an omen for the future: one third of the offering was sold in the ordinary course of the distribution to normal institutional investors in the United States and elsewhere. This was the first time any institutional investors had invested in Israel equity!

That effort in 1987 launched Israeli entry into the international equity markets, with the result that Israel today vies with Canada as to the largest number of foreign issuers listed on United States stock exchanges. It also gave confidence to private investors to invest larger and larger amounts in Israeli companies, especially in the technology and health care industries, and led to the creation of Investment Funds for investing in Israel securities, both in and outside of Israel.

Bond offerings, of course, continued apace. Indeed, in 1996, we did an offering for the government-controlled Israel Electric Company. It included a substantial tranche of 100 year bonds; this was both economically and psychologically significant, because now Israel could say: “Look, the markets believe we are here to stay”.

In the aftermath of the banking crisis and the reforms in the mid 1980’s, investors have gained confidence in Israel’s economic stability. Events have proved that the government is able to control inflation and maintain a stable tax system. The Shekel has recently improved its value against the dollar, the Euro and many other currencies. The GNP has been growing at 5% per year for several years and inflation has been hovering around zero for a couple of years. All this despite an unstable political environment and hostile neighbors.

The shibboleth that Israelis are good entrepreneurs but not good managers, is clearly false. In fact, they are great managers and most of them are educated in Israel. Despite periodic brain drains and a hostile environment, Israel is an exciting and dynamic country, constantly changing, constantly renewing. Just consider how it has evolved from a financial backwater in the 60’s to the buoyant, stable economy of today. It is an incredible success story.

The 100 year Israel Electric bonds mature in 2096 and I have no doubt that they will be paid in full!

Harvey M. Krueger, who had been president and CEO of Kuhn Loeb until its merger with Lehman Brothers, became Vice Chairman of Lehman Brothers Inc. and is now Vice Chairman Emeritus.
Nearly a decade ago, on Erev Shabbat August 28, 1998, the sanctuary of Central Synagogue was devastated by fire. It was a painful evening as our members and strangers looked on. Flames and smoke lapped at the overhang of the building’s roof before the roof caved in, smashing to the sanctuary floor beneath. As I stood there, I remembered the photos I had seen of Kristallnacht, when marauding Germans ransacked and burned synagogues across the country in November 1938. I also recalled the historic image of the destruction of the Temple, the centerpiece of Israelite worship, by the Romans in 70 CE. The Germans eradicated millions of Jews, the Romans tried to subdue them, and sanctuaries have been destroyed by fires, but Jews have survived, rebuilt and never ceased to worship. This continuation of Jewish life is supported by two factors.

The first is conceptual: Jews believe in “resurrection” (l’chiyat ha-matim). Our forebears, thousands of years ago, were convinced of the resurrection of the dead. Death was simply a transition to another life in the olam ha-ba, the world to come. Though a significant portion of the Jewish community to this day continues to praise God: “You are faithful to revive the dead. Blessed are You, O Lord, who revives the dead,” we in the Reform movement had disowned this fundamental and traditional portion of our daily liturgy. Instead, Reform Judaism replaced literal resurrection with eternality of the spirit, substituting for the original text: “Praised are You, O Lord, who has implanted within us eternal life.” Mishkan T’filah, the Reform movement’s recently published prayer book, which we now use in our congregation, provides an alternative return to the traditional meaning: “Blessed are You, Adonai, who revives the dead.”

The second factor is historic: The Roman conquest would not vanquish us. We could and would rise again. According to the traditional liturgy, God would return us to Jerusalem and there would be rebuilt “an everlasting structure” in which God would dwell. The physical destruction of Jerusalem and of the Temple would not be a cause for abandoning our existence and abiding mission. We believed we would arise. The historic agent of this process of renewal was Yochanan ben Zakkai. He prevented the disappearance of our people. He is my hero.

Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai lived during the first century of the Common Era (CE), when the Romans ruled Judea, the present Israel, and their emperors used their conquered and subservient provinces to supply the funds needed to support the vast Roman army. Our forebears chafed under Roman economic and political oppression and periodic rebellions erupted. Rome did not tolerate such revolts; consequences were immediate and devastating, as indicated both by the gospel narratives of the treatment of Jesus and by Josephus’ history of the siege at Masada (73 CE).

Yochanan was born into this environment. We know that he lived and studied in the Galilee, the northern part of present-day Israel, and that he returned to Jerusalem as a political follower of the liberal and renowned teacher Hillel. At that time, in the latter half of the
first century CE, Jerusalem was a hotbed of competing ideological camps advocating conflicting policies on how to deal with the Romans. The Sicari, the most extreme Jewish zealots, their name derived from the sica (a short dagger), wanted no accommodation with Rome and killed Roman officials as well as Jewish partisans of Rome. Yochanan had family ties to the zealots. His nephew Abba Sikra headed the Biryonai, a zealot faction committed to armed battle with Rome. He is reported to have torched the provisions that had been stockpiled by the Judeans in preparation for the siege imposed by Rome. Abba Sikra rationalized that, by destroying the supplies of his own people, the Jerusalemites would be compelled to battle the Romans.

**The Roman conquest would not vanquish us.**

By contrast, Yochanan, on the opposite side of the political spectrum, was willing to accommodate to Roman rule. In fact, he, a Pharisee, did not believe in the supreme prominence of Jerusalem as a sacred city. While he did not seek the destruction of Jerusalem, he was also not prepared to sacrifice Jewish life in defense of the city. To Yochanan, Jerusalem represented a system of practice and ritual that he and the Pharisees found increasingly irrelevant and abhorrent.

The crux of the story, which may be difficult for us to understand, is that Yochanan did not romanticize the Torah system of sacrifice, Temple and priesthood. He had concluded that Jerusalem, while a symbol of Judean statehood, was no longer central to emerging Jewish life. The sacrificial cult of animal and harvest offerings that had been appropriate for an agricultural society, were no longer meaningful for a growing urban, artisan, merchant population living in Jerusalem and other towns. As a result, the Temple in Jerusalem itself seemed no longer central, except as a symbol. Though the priesthood was still held in historical esteem, it was increasingly debunked by a population that viewed the priests’ excessive lifestyle and political pandering as morally wrong. They were exasperated that priests, having been born into their position, were not required to demonstrate either merit or ability. Sharing these views, Yochanan ben Zakkai was both philosophically and literally prepared to abandon Jerusalem and the sacrificial/priesthood/Temple system it represented. This is why he initiated a revolution.

When, in 67 CE, the Roman General Vespasian, with 60,000 troops, launched a brutal campaign to subdue Galilee and to destroy Jerusalem, the story tells that Yochanan had himself smuggled out of Jerusalem in a coffin. Though we might conclude that his escape was intended to deceive the Roman troops besieging Jerusalem, these soldiers had no reason to prevent abandonment of the city. The ruse of a fake burial was more likely intended to dupe the zealots who would have killed any countrymen leaving the city.

Once outside, it is written, “Yochanan reached Vespasian and greeted him with a royal greeting. Vespasian remarked, ‘You give me a royal greeting, but I am not a king; and should the king hear of it he will put me to death.’ Yochanan answered, ‘If you are not the king, you will be eventually, because the Temple will only be destroyed by a king’s hand’...”

Three days later a messenger arrived with the news that the Romans had proclaimed Vespasian king (Emporer of Rome). Vespasian then said to Yochanan, “Make a request of me and I will grant it.” Yochanan answered, “I ask nothing of you except the town of Yavneh, where I might go and teach my disciples and there establish a prayer house and perform all the commandments.” The Romans honored his request. Then they proceeded with the siege and destruction of Jerusalem, its citizens and its Temple. By some estimate the final death toll of the First Jewish-Roman War ranged from 600,000 to 1.3 million Jews.

But Yochanan and his disciples established in Yavneh, the refuge granted by Vespasian, an academy and a court of rabbis, that assumed the decisions and authority once held by the priesthood. Incrementally, Yochanan created the institutions that are the foundation of the Judaism we know. Because of Yochanan’s vision, the synagogue became the center of Jewish life, rather than the single Temple in Jerusalem. Rabbis, rather than priests, became leaders of the community. Prayer became the core of worship, replacing the sacrificial cult. Our rituals of worship now are vastly different from those directed in the Torah.

I sometimes imagine that if the Romans had not destroyed the Temple, Jews ultimately would have condemned to oblivion an institution that was becoming increasingly irrelevant to their lives. Today we are grateful to Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai for his heroic revolution that shaped and changed Jewish history and worship in the most profound way.
When Rabbi Rubinstein led a group from Central Synagogue to Berlin and Prague in 2007, it was a more complicated trip than the ones to Israel or Argentina. The decision to go to Germany is judged in ways few travel plans are. But Rabbi Rubinstein is adamant that Jews should visit the places where they once lived and were persecuted, because we need to bear witness to their extermination by the Nazis and acknowledge the past.

Another compelling reason for visiting Germany now is the renewal of Judaism which, since the fall of communism and the reunification of the country in 1989, is fed mainly by immigrants from the former USSR and Israel. It is the fastest growing Jewish community in the world. Since many of these Jews were raised in a state where religion was suppressed, they need to be exposed to liberal Judaism. As a result, the Reform movement founded Geiger College, a seminary in Berlin. The first class graduated in June 2007 in a ceremony attended by Chancellor Angela Merkel and other German dignitaries. It is a marvel to have rabbis ordained in Germany now and to have congregations ready and waiting for them. We attended Shabbat services at a congregation housed in an old US Army chapel. About 50 congregants, together with our group from Central Synagogue, participated in services that were held both in German and Hebrew.

Berlin is a difficult city to dislike, even for a traveler with prejudices. It is a thriving city, with exciting new architecture, well restored old buildings, clean streets, manageable traffic, great restaurants, museums, art galleries, and shopping. Potsdamer Platz, once a no-man’s land between East and...
West Berlin dotted with explosive mines, is now an energetic commercial, entertainment and residential square with movie theaters, a film museum and a beer hall.

Our group stayed at the Adlon, a gracious hotel near the Brandenburg Gate. Thousands of goose-stepping Nazis once marched through this imposing arch topped by its horse drawn chariot. Then it became the border between East and West Berlin, and now it is a landmark in a swanky neighborhood, the end of a boulevard with the lovely name of Unter den Linden.

Close to the Brandenburg Gate is the Holocaust Memorial, designed by American architect Peter Eisenman. The vertigo inducing labyrinth of blank, uneven tombstones takes up nearly a whole city block, together with a documentation center in an underground bunker. The memorial is in a bustling part of the city that Berliners pass all the time. As a reminder of what happened 70 years ago, sidewalks all over the city are dotted with small brass plaques in front of many homes, giving the names of the Jews who had lived there and the dates they had been deported. No one now visiting or living in Berlin can escape knowledge of the genocide. The Daniel Liebeskind designed Jewish Museum offers further testament to the Holocaust and is an important part of any visit to Berlin.

For many in our group, the most significant stop in Germany was the suburban railway station at Grunewald, about seven miles outside Berlin. From this depot, hundreds of freight trains packed with Jewish deportees left for the concentration camps. Clutching the one suitcase they were permitted to take, Jews were marched through the streets of Berlin to this station located in a wealthy, stately suburb with comfortable homes, majestic trees and well kept gardens. Nazi records provided the details for the engraved bricks now lining the station platform that list the dates, destinations and numbers deported in each transport. For example, “February 10, 1941: 741 to Auschwitz,” “February 12, 1941: 402 to Theresienstadt,” “February 15, 1941: 801 to Belsen-Bergen”.... The march of the desperate did not just happen once or twice, but continued until 1945 and the residents of Berlin must have known that the Jews were disappearing.

At the Grunewald station, we were joined by a class of German school children, several of whom were of Asian and Turkish ancestry. Despite their initial whispering, squirming and shoving, the teacher made sure that the 10 or 11 year-old students saw the bricks and understood her somber explanation of their country’s sordid history. They also saw our shock and grief.

Visiting Dresden, we came across more evidence of the renewal of Jewish life in Germany. A striking contemporary synagogue stands in the place where the old one was destroyed on Kristallnacht in Dresden in 1938. It is the first new synagogue in the former East Germany to be rebuilt since the end of World War II. Only one remnant survived from the original structure: a Star of David saved by a firefighter and hidden in his home. It now adorns the entrance to the new synagogue.

It is the fastest growing Jewish community in the world.

The synagogue is part of the ongoing reconstruction of Dresden, which was fire bombed by the Allies. The local Lutheran minister supported its construction when his own church, as well as the Catholic cathedral, were being rebuilt. Today Dresden is a city with world-class art and jewel collections, filled with great history and historical anecdotes.

The renewal of Jewish life is part of the overall renewal in Germany since the wall came down in 1989. Anyone interested in Jewish life today, as well as those who want to bear witness to a savage past, should pay a visit to Germany, and especially Berlin, which is a beautiful, livable city, rebuilt after two dark chapters in history.  

Catherine Heller is a freelance writer who loves to travel. She has been a member of Central Synagogue for over 20 years.
We Jews were once indigenous. Long before temples and synagogues, Jewish tradition was born in the wilderness. Our ancestors were moved by the rhythm and phenomena of the natural world.

At sunset, darkness fostered uncertainty and doubt. Under the night sky, stars by the millions overwhelmed them. At sunrise, dawn revived clarity and hope. The end of summer prompted ingathering and introspection. Spring brought optimism and thanksgiving.

The sun and the moon, the drama of the weather, the extremes of terrain, the mysteries of beginnings and endings, all shaped them. In our Torah, the elements of nature are key players. Throughout our existence, we have told stories in which gardens and deserts, floods and fire, mountains and rivers, storms and droughts are important ingredients.

In our Torah, the elements of nature are key players.

A way of life and inherent understanding of the world grew from that intimate relationship with nature. Influenced by the physical world that both nurtured and threatened, a practical and spiritual wisdom took root and began to evolve. It was a wisdom derived from experiencing the depths of hardship and the transcendence of wonder. We began to sense truths about life itself and to put our trust in them. It gave birth to an awareness of the nature of time and a reverence for all living things.

As we evolved as a people, the lessons of our shared experiences became codified and ritualized. What was once common wisdom became religious law. Among our mitzvot, there is a wide range of prescriptions and prohibitions. Some are very specific and literal. One may not drain one's well if it will diminish water needed by a neighbor. One may not dispose of rocks cleared from one's field in a road. The wood of fruit trees is prohibited for use in certain implements. Tanners, threshing and other objectionable activities are prohibited in proximity to homes. In the Book of Numbers, a large swath of natural, protected land is prescribed to separate city and active agricultural land beyond.

Many dozens of specifics are enumerated in the Shulchan Arukh. Their common denominator is an insistence that we be aware of the consequences of our activities and be concerned for our neighbor's well-being. Acting for the common good, including valuing the beauty of the land, was the foundation for our emerging social order. Respect for our shared environment became a logical extension.

From the sensitivity for each other's well-being, another concept evolved to influence how we viewed the world. Our ancestors understood the importance of moderation and rest to the fostering of renewal: renewal of the land — renewal of the body — renewal of the spirit. In Leviticus, we are required to give the land a complete rest every seventh year. For the land, the Sabbath year prevented depletion. For the spirit, it provided a break in routine that heightened an awareness of our own dispensability, and our interdependence. Relying on only those
crops that reappeared without human help, we understood that sustenance is a gift of nature. The Sabbath year brought us back to a more basic relationship with the land and a gratitude for life.

Foremost among all of our traditions, the Sabbath day is fundamental to fostering perspective in our lives. Our ancestors understood the need for renewal and restoration in every aspect of life. It is compassionate, and it is practical. They understood that rest is essential to health and that the health of each life is essential to the health of the whole. For those too driven or insensitive to appreciate the necessity of renewal, a day of rest was mandated.

Shabbat asks us to look back at the week that is ending — and look for meaning there. It asks us to look ahead to the week that is coming — and ponder how to give it meaning.

In the four billion years of the earth’s life, we humans are newcomers. Today, our way of life has moved very far from our primal origins. But our inherent humanness has not. Though we now live in a world of solid shelter, assured nourishment, instant news, and high speeds, we still retain the basic nature of our ancestors. Shabbat helps us return to moving, as they did, in time with Nature’s breathing and Her heartbeats — the day, the week, the seasons, the year, lifetimes. Gently, She takes us by the hand to walk in step with Her.

In an era when we have become more focused on our own immediate world, Shabbat beckons us to engage with the world at large, the origin of our spiritual feelings. Profound wisdom can be derived from being a part of life’s most basic happenings and experiencing its most ancient sensations. The wilderness is where Emet, ethical truths, were first revealed and still are evident everywhere.

When we fetch our own water, we understand its value.
When daylight is our only light, we learn to use it thoughtfully.
When unknown noises frighten us in the dark, we realize we are visitors in someone else’s home.
When new life and decay are intertwined, we begin to understand continuity — and eternity.
When we are awed by sunrise and ant-hills and starlight and bird song, we begin to sense our place in the universe.

When we are touched by the world around us, we come to see that all life is interconnected. It is a realization that comforts and inspires inner peace. It is a knowing that nourishes us — a knowing that renews us. We become more open and receptive. Empathy and compassion come forth.

When empathy and compassion foster healing and restoration, renewal comes full circle and becomes self-fulfilling. Is that not our life’s work?

When not in the woods, Ben Baxt attends Shabbat morning services at Central Synagogue. He has been involved in the restoration of the sanctuary and has helped weave new elements into traditional rituals. An architect, he and Susan live in Brooklyn.

Reading Suggestions:
Editor [E.] What prompted you to become involved in urban renewal projects in New York?

Marvin H. Meltzer [M.M.] I grew up in St. Paul, Minnesota. After graduating from the University of Minnesota School of Architecture, I was drafted into the Army and was stationed on Governor’s Island. It was and still is a beautiful place. I had a direct view of Lower Manhattan. It inspired me to stay in New York to work as an architect.

Everyone’s life has a certain journey and, if you are lucky, you can take hold of it and direct it to where you want to go. There is probably no other place where I could have worked and got the same kind of fulfillment as I get here.

**I thought that my architectural career had come to a screeching halt.**

I first got into the renewal of neighborhoods when the bottom fell out of the real estate market in the late 1980’s. An architect friend of mine who worked on housing for not-for-profits, the homeless and people with special needs, asked me to help him with a design.

E.: What was your first project?

M.M. Twenty buildings by Crotona Park in the South Bronx. At the time, the city owned a lot of devastated buildings and vacant land where houses had been torn down, and Mayor Koch had initiated an extraordinary program to rehabilitate them in order to revitalize the neighborhoods.

When I worked on that specific project, we always needed police escorts. It was a scene straight out of *Bonfire of the Vanities*, with drug dealers doing brisk business right there on the street. I thought that my architectural career had come to a screeching halt. But then I began to see the opportunities of what I could do as an architect in the South Bronx. Now, it is a vital community with not an empty shop around.

E.: What else did you do in that area?

M.M. One of the big projects was Melrose Court, which consisted of 3 city blocks of vacant land that one of my clients had assembled. I realized that here I could do something really powerful and become the maven of low-rise, high density housing in the Bronx. The Borough President had envisioned a suburban environment, Westchester-style houses with clapboard siding which, to me, was frankly bizarre, because buildings in the Bronx are mostly masonry. Although I created what they wanted, I did it my way, and it ended up transforming that whole part of the South Bronx.

I designed Melrose Court as townhouses for local ownership.
entered from the street through a yellow hallway into this quiet inner space. It really fascinates me how such spatial transitions are experienced as a part of life in New York and how they can be incorporated into architectural design.

E.: Would you say that urban renewal is primarily economically driven?
M.M. Largely yes, because people are always looking for places to live that they can afford. That is what is driving the revitalization of Harlem presently. For example, we did a whole city block that had been vacant on Frederick Douglas Boulevard. The city has very strict guidelines for such urban renewal projects, and the community also has advocates who represent its needs and wants. The politics of creating development in New York is intense and fascinating, but it works. The whole area, like the South Bronx, is now revitalized and also, thanks to more ownership, the community has stabilized. Smaller developers then follow as does more retail and more people who want to live near it.

When people start moving into a neighborhood in search of a better and more affordable living environment, it begins to change. The Upper West Side is a great example of this kind of renewal. Today, as many orthodox families move there, the apartments that are built, the shops and restaurants that follow, all serve their particular needs. When I first designed a residential building on 81st and Columbus in the early 1980’s, the area was run down and homeless people were sleeping on the streets.

Now we are doing a luxury building on 149th and Broadway. So within 30 years, individual neighborhoods within the Upper West Side have undergone renewal in different ways that reflect their changing communities.

E.: What other guidelines do you have to follow when revitalizing a building or neighborhood?
M.M.: Working in a designated historic neighborhood like the Lower East Side involves different players and different rules. It puts restrictions on what you can do, how big or how high you can build, but very rarely are restrictions placed on what you can create architecturally, unless the building itself is on the historical register. I have designed some very contemporary housing in that area. On the other hand, when I am working with a landmarked building, I have to be very specific; exteriors and windows have to be preserved, and down to the materials used, everything is prescribed. Landmarks are controversial because working with such restrictions is usually not economical. But unless people are forced to preserve something, they usually won’t. Also, preserving the Lower East Side as a historic district has created economic value and revitalized shopping and tax income.

E.: Were you involved in the restoration of Chasam Sopher on the Lower East Side?
M.M.: Yes, I was. It is an orthodox shul in what was historically New York’s Jewish neighborhood. Now it is again attracting young Jews and gave them a Disney World appearance with flat facades and peaked roofs, supported from behind, just like a movie set. But then you walk through the façade into these magical courtyards, planted and landscaped and you are in another private world. I visualized this journey as one experiences New York, transitioning from the subway, to the busy street and from there into your apartment. A lot of what I have done has courtyards, also in Manhattan. For instance, on 26th Street, while retaining the traditional facade with its fire escapes, I took the middle out of a wide building that is

continued on page 24
When Moses came down from the mountain bearing God’s commandments, he was horrified to see the Israelites worshipping and dancing around the Golden Calf. In a fit of anger, he raised the sacred tablets above his head and brought them crashing to the ground, smashing them into a thousand pieces.

You can imagine how he felt after spending forty days and forty nights on the mountain top, communing with God and receiving His covenant, only to find that while away, the people had betrayed him. Hadn’t they promised to obey the commandments even before receiving them? But they had become impatient and broken their promise.

Even a piece of stone with only a single letter is holy...

After the Golden Calf had been destroyed and those most responsible punished, Moses sat down on a rock by the edge of the camp, feeling weary and utterly forlorn. After all the travails he had been through with the Israelites, all the suffering they had endured and the triumphs they had witnessed, was this how it was going to end, right here in the wilderness? What more would it take to make this people trust in God and keep that trust? And why had God urged him to take on this task, against his wishes, if it was to end like this, a task impossible to achieve?

As he was turning over these troubled thoughts in his mind, he noticed that a crowd of children had gathered at the foot of the mountain just where he had smashed the two tablets. Curious to find out what they were doing, he made his way towards them. Some of them were scrabbling in the sand while others were emptying their pockets.

“What are you doing, children?” Moses asked.

“We’re collecting the pieces of stone,” replied one of the taller boys with tousled red hair who appeared to be their leader.

“Why are you doing that?” Moses asked.

“Well, sir, you told us you would be bringing us God’s covenant. So we thought that was exactly what was on those stone tablets you smashed.”

“And if we’re right,” another boy interrupted, “then those broken pieces of stone must be very holy since they contain words from God.”

“Even a piece of stone with only a single letter is holy,” a little girl said.

“And when we’ve collected all the broken stones, we’re going to put all the pieces together,” the leader interjected. “We know that’s what God would want.”

“You know, children, that’s a beautiful thought and a wonderful thing you are doing,” Moses replied. “Now it may be difficult for you to find all the pieces and put them back together, but don’t let that stop you. For what you are doing is very important. Before I saw you here, I was feeling very sad, as though all my work had ended in failure. But you’ve made me realize that we must never
Nestled within our trillions of cells lie complete copies of our unique genetic instructions, encoded in our DNA. This biological manual, our genetic “Torah”, is passed along every time one cell divides to form two, starting shortly after sperm meets egg. Yet cells take from that manual only what they need to survive and specialize: a muscle cell reads the blueprints to contract but not communicate; a nerve cell does the opposite.

Building our bodies requires stem cells. They provide the raw materials to sculpt our embryonic selves, giving rise to the tissue layers that emerge from featureless balls of cells. As tissues fold and contort into organs, a human-like form gradually takes shape.

Stem cells continue to divide to supply new cells as the fetus blossoms towards birth. And after that spectacular event, for decades, stem cells tucked into pockets of our parts — in our brains, hearts, livers, and more — keep pumping out cells. While cells at our surfaces accumulate various insults and are easily shed, stem cells come to the rescue if we suffer injury or disease. Stem cells may reawaken and begin dividing at a disaster site, filling in tissue, or be recruited from the bone marrow to assist in the replenishment. 

We need our stem cells and their marvelous capacity for self-renewal. The mantra, in stem cell-speak, is “potential.” The descendants of a stem cell in an early embryo can specialize as anything. As time goes by, possibilities narrow, much as a college student selects a major. In our bodies, progenitor cells have more limited potential, and specialized cells even less. Our brain cells stop dividing when we are children — except for a few stem cells hugging the fluid-filled cavities in the middle of our brains. We harbor stem cells in our teeth, hair roots, salivary glands, and fat. Some are inevitably discarded as medical waste. 

We need our stem cells and their marvelous capacity for self-renewal. Without them, we’d never develop beyond fertilized eggs. So why not tap their talent for renewal? That’s the basis for the use of stem cells in regenerative medicine, and is already routine for bone marrow and umbilical cord blood stem cells. Sources of stem cells range from the earliest embryos to fresh corpses. The hope is that one day in the future, patients will supply their own stem cells to generate customized raw material to help heal. Those cells will be genetically reprogrammed to revert to a stem-like state and then to reinvent themselves as a needed cell type. However, much research is still necessary to reprogram stem cells in a way that is controlled, so as to not cause cancer. The diversity of potential applications is staggering, with targets ranging from heart disease and spinal cord injuries, to cartilage repair, liver repopulation, and even treating pattern baldness. We still must learn how to introduce and guide stem cells exclusively to areas in need, as well as how to coax their progenitors to replace damaged tissue, without triggering uncontrolled growth.

Although the adult human body harbors sufficient sources of stem cells to fuel many years of research, the very best stem cells for research come from early embryos, at the ball-of-cells stage. Nurtured in laboratory glassware, these cells are revealing the never-before-seen beginnings of diseases. What these enigmatic cells can reveal to us will fuel discovery and development of treatments that we can’t yet even imagine.
A French family torn apart by the terror of the Holocaust. A manuscript that lay forgotten in a suitcase for 40 years. A flooded basement. A global literary sensation. Such are the circumstances that resuscitated the long-lost novel *Suite Française*. With its triumphant publication in France in 2004, the literary voice of long-dead author Irène Némirovsky was resurrected to thunderous acclaim and no small measure of controversy.

*Suite Française* comprises the first two parts of what Némirovsky envisioned as a five-volume saga of France at war and occupied peace, modeled after Bach’s *French Suites*. The first part, *Storm In June*, begins as German forces mass outside of Paris in 1940. As panic-stricken citizens flee the city for the surrounding countryside, the author documents their ordeal with the keen observations of one who fled with them. An acclaimed novelist from the age of 23, Némirovsky uses her prodigious gifts to skewer the mostly upper-class refugees and their hapless servants who scurry about the provinces to devastating effect. In her words, the evacuation becomes a tragedy of errors. A priest is murdered by the thuggish adolescents in his charge. A charming boulevardier steals petrol from an unsuspecting honeymoon couple in order to drive his precious collection of porcelain to safety. A pampered courtesan changes patrons as the fortunes of her “sponsors” ebb and flow.

Book Two, *Dolce*, takes place after the armistice between Germany and France brings some semblance of order. It chronicles the occupation in a rural village. As the Germans, polite and proper to a fault, billet themselves in the homes of the townspeople, resentments and tensions build. Will the newlywed bride whose husband is a POW succumb to the charms of a dashing Wehrmacht officer? Will the sullen farmer defy the curfew and risk a bullet? Will there be enough food to make it through the winter? The story concludes with the German unit, about to return home, summoned instead to the Russian front. The village is emptied of its occupying force. As they depart, perversely, so does some of the community’s vitality.

The author recalls the events as only someone who has experienced them can. Unfortunately, she never lived to complete the last three volumes, *Captivity, Battles and Peace*. All of which makes the book’s appendix every bit as poignant as the novel, perhaps even more so. We learn that, unlike the mostly French characters in her novel, Némirovsky, her banker husband Michel Epstein, and their two daughters were already marked people. As Jews and immigrants, from Ukraine and Belgium respectively, Irène and Michel were denied French citizenship in 1939. Even a last-minute conversion to Catholicism provided no protection. By 1940, the racial laws in Vichy France were every bit as cruel as those in Germany. Jews were officially barred from government, the armed forces, entertainment, arts, media, education, law, and medicine.

For Némirovsky, this must have been particularly galling. She rose to literary fame with the publication of her first novel, *David Golder*. The story of a Kiev-born rag merchant, the title character is variously described as “a fat little Jew” and “a grasping Jew.” The book...
was made into an equally successful film. When compared to Némirovsky’s Golder, Philip Roth’s self-hating Alexander Portnoy takes on the qualities of a saint. What’s more, several of her other writings were serialized in Gringoire, and Candide, two right-wing publications that were virulently anti-immigrant and anti-Semitic. Many of her pre-war friends would later become Nazi collaborators and Vichy zealots.

This is not to say that Némirovsky was unmindful of her own vulnerability to the gathering storm. In her notes she laments, “My God! What is this country doing to me? Since it is rejecting me, let us consider it coldly, let us watch as it loses its honor and its life.”

By mid-1942, as those around her were swallowed up by the Nazi terror, she stuffed a leather suitcase with her writings and entrusted it to her daughters. She was arrested that summer and deported to Auschwitz, where she died of typhus.

Desperate to find her, Michel, either in an appalling lack of common sense or in heroic desperation, penned a letter to Otto Abetz, the German ambassador to France: “Even though my wife is of Jewish descent, she does not speak of the Jews with any affection whatsoever in her works...it seems to me both unjust and illogical that the Germans should imprison a woman who, despite being of Jewish descent, has no sympathy whatsoever — all her books prove this — either for Judaism or the Bolshevik regime.”

Within weeks, Michel was sent to Auschwitz and promptly gassed. The suitcase and the couple’s two daughters were spirited away to a convent and cared for by sympathetic Catholics who risked their own lives to shelter the girls.

Forty years later, Némirovsky’s daughter, Denise Epstein, opened the old suitcase for the first time and leafed through its contents. With that, her mother’s riveting portrayal of courage and sacrifice, suffering and cruelty, hope and despair found a public and a purpose. It breathed new life into a name and a legacy once obliterated by hatred.


Steve Klausner is an advertising copywriter and an award-winning screenwriter. A longtime member of Central Synagogue, Steve is also Chairman of the Communications Committee.

What the critics said about Suite Francaise

“It is Némirovsky’s special gift to write as a novelist about a human drama in which she is a designated victim.” - The New York Times

“Remarkable.” - Newsweek

“A masterpiece ... ripped from oblivion.” - LeMonde

“Testimonials of such power that having been written during, not after, a war can be counted on the fingers of one hand.” - L’Express

“This extraordinary work of fiction about the German occupation of France is embedded in a real story as gripping and complex as the invented one.” - The Washington Post

“Némirovsky’s Suite Francaise, which might be the last great fiction of the war, provides us with an intimate recounting of occupation, exodus and loss.” - The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

despair and give up hope. We were chosen by God to bring harmony to this world. That’s a sacred task we cannot reject or refuse. And children like you, who trust in God and delight in His miracles, give us hope for renewal. So I must go back and beg God to forgive us and allow me to return to the mountain and receive a new set of tablets inscribed with His covenant.”

“And what shall we do with the pieces of stone we collect?” the leader of the group asked.

“I want each of you to keep one piece of stone and to guard it safely. When you have children of your own, you must give your piece of stone to your firstborn child. Each of them must pass the stone down through every generation. Then that piece of stone will serve as a reminder, that we have a sacred task to bring harmony to this world. Each generation must teach the next. In that way you will be bringing the pieces of stone together to remake the tablets of God’s covenant. Will you promise me to do that?”

“Yes, Moses,” all the children replied.

“But what happens to the pieces of stone we can’t find?” the little girl asked.

“That’s a very good question,” Moses answered. “God will scatter the missing pieces throughout the world. Then one day every child who does not have a piece of stone will find one of the missing pieces and when that happens the whole world will be renewed and returned to harmony.”

Aunt Miriam

BROKEN TABLETS continued from p. 14

Aunt Miriam welcomes your comments and would like to hear your ideas where we should look for those missing pieces of God’s covenant. Please write to her at editorhashiur@censyn.org.
I met Job one drab December morning in Central Park. He was sitting alone on a bench, huddled into the upturned collar of his overcoat. The face seemed familiar, but only as I drew near, did it dawn on me who he was. Media headlines had captured the mercurial rise of his business empire and its most recent collapse into bankruptcy. And as if that were not enough, he had lost his three children in a fire that had destroyed his country mansion.

“Where was He when I needed Him?”

Wanting to comfort him, I sat down beside him. “I was so sorry to hear about your tragic losses,” I began. Job nodded several times with tightly clenched jaw. Then he turned towards me and I noticed the dark shadows beneath his red, swollen eyes. He broke into a fit of coughing, turning away to take a crumpled handkerchief from his coat pocket to wipe his mouth. He started to say something I could not make out, only to lapse into a heavy silence.

Staring at the ground, he muttered something; then looked up at me with tears in his eyes. His hand reached out to grip mine. “Where did I go wrong?” he groaned. “Why was I deserted? That’s what I keep asking myself. Why was I deserted?” He intensified his grip.

“Who deserted you?” I regretted the question as soon as I had asked it.

“God!” he exclaimed fiercely. “Where was He when I needed Him?”

I was taken aback by his reply. “Do you really believe God interferes in our personal lives?” I responded. “Do you think misfortune occurs through God’s indifference?” I knew of Job’s reputation as a conspicuously generous supporter of Jewish causes. But according to what I had read, his background was secular. Evidently, he had embraced Judaism as a result of his marriage into a wealthy, devout family that had fueled his business success.

“Yes, I do!” he asserted. “That’s why we pray! Why else say all those personal prayers? Don’t we pray for things we want to happen… like prosperity and good health? Don’t we ask God to send healing to those we cherish? Our prayers are full of personal needs we want God to satisfy! Isn’t that why we observe the mitzvot … to gain God’s pleasure?”

“But still bad things do happen to good people. How do you explain that?” I replied.

“Throughout our history even the most pious have died while protesting their faith in God. How does that square with a God who personally intervenes?”

“You tell me!” Job responded. “I can only tell you what I learnt as a child from my late Grandfather. He was a most saintly person. He taught me that God was the Source of Love and that Love was the true reality of human existence. He taught me that if we love greatly, we come nearer to God. And the nearer to God we get, the more we understand the true nature of life and of life hereafter. He spoke of a love that is selfless and transcendent. Remember when the Romans tortured Rabbi Akivah to death for teaching Torah? As the iron combs tore into his flesh he began to recite the Sh’ma and as he did so, he cried out to his pupils that only now did he understand the true meaning of loving God with all one’s heart, with all one’s soul and with all one’s might. That’s what loving greatly truly means, my Grandfather taught me. It’s a lesson I will never forget.”
through the Park. And mulling over what you had said, I realized that I was totally absorbed in my own self-pity, without any thought about my wife’s grief at losing the children. How I could have been so selfish, I really don’t know. I’m not sure whether I really loved my wife when we married, but by sharing our grief we drew closer than we had ever been, and the sort of love you spoke of began to blossom. We now have a little boy, a Sabbath child, and another baby on the way. My wife says they are gifts from God.”

“I restarted my business and the strangest thing was that the banks I thought wouldn’t want to know me, rushed to give me their support. The business is going well but I keep it private and in perspective. No more ego trips. But the most beautiful thing of all, which your Grandfather would have appreciated, was a visit my wife and I paid to one of her favorite uncles, whose health was failing and who had recently become blind. As we entered his bedroom he held out his arms, with a beaming smile on his face. Before we could even greet him, he told us that he could feel God’s presence in the room, embracing us. At that moment I began to understand what your Grandfather had meant.”

Eric Levine is a transnational corporate lawyer, a founding principal of Millenia Capital Partners, an investment advisory firm and CEO of its inner-city redevelopment division.

Reading Suggestion:
“Ma Tovu ohalecha Yaakov mishk’notecha Yisrael” How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel,” is the first line of the opening prayer of every morning service. It is taken from a passage in Numbers 24 when a foreign prophet, Balaam, upon orders of his king, sets out to curse the Israelites, enemies of his people. Standing on an embankment overlooking their tents and seeing how they lived together simply and in goodness, his curse is transformed into blessing.

Ma Tovu may not be as compelling as the sh’mah, as visionary as the aleinu or as stirring as the mourner’s kaddish, but I find it to be the most instructive of all our liturgy regarding the purpose of prayer. It reminds us that the importance of worship does not lie only in how we experience the service but also in how we emerge from it. We enter the synagogue, bruised by the realities of daily life, but, like Balaam, we leave it renewed: more attuned to the simple wonders around us and closer to the best within us.

If the purpose of prayer is renewal, it is fitting that the development of Jewish liturgy has undergone a continual process of renewal through the centuries, from the Biblical era until today. Balaam’s spontaneous outburst resembles the typical form of expression of our most ancient prayers. In the Torah, blessings and prayers do not follow a specific formula. Some are a direct request to God. Eleazar, Abraham’s non-Israelite servant, prays to Adonai that the woman intended for
this evolving rite, as did the practice of reading Torah portions. However, individual Jews had the freedom to express their prayers in their own words, using their vernacular language. From this emerged the dialectic of Jewish prayer: specific structure (keva) that allowed for outpouring of the heart (kavanah). We depend upon keva for a framework that will define our tradition and unify us. At the same time, space for kavanah insures that worship will breathe with self-expression and relevance. Both are necessary elements for meaningful, communal worship, but the perfect balance has often proved elusive and subjective, especially once liturgy was written down.

One generation passed down its practice to another; individual creativity lessened as local customs and prayers evolved. People of a specific community would all bow at the same point in their service; a certain liturgical phrase or poem became set among that group of worshippers. As more traditions developed, people sought validation of their authenticity. By the 8th century, the Jewish Academy of Sura in Babylonia had attained tremendous authority. These sages, known as Geonim (singular, Gaon), received inquiries from different Jewish communities asking about the legality and permissibility of various liturgical and ritual customs. Not surprisingly, responses reflected Babylonian Jewish practices. In 857 CE, the leading Gaon, Amram bar Sheshna, penned what may be considered the first Jewish prayer book, or siddur. It contained services for ordinary days and holidays, life-cycle ceremonies as well as commentaries, directing people how to offer prayers and warning about incorrect practices.

This Siddur preceded the invention of the printing press. Though few Jews owned a copy, many rabbis and chazzanim (cantors) used their own to lead services. Different siddurim were written, but Amran’s remained the most influential, not only in Babylon, but also later in Western Europe and eventually even in America, especially after printed copies became available. However, the process of liturgical renewal continued. Elements of the prayer service fundamental to us today were added in later generations, such as the Kabbalat Shabbat service, born from the 16th century mystics of Safed, and yizkor memorial prayers, created in response to the Crusades and 17th century Polish pogroms.

Although the reforming of Jewish worship began as early as the destruction of the Temple, the worship rituals of our Reform

continued on next page
movement are far more recent. Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, one of the founders of the American Reform movement, authored *Minhag America*, a siddur he hoped would unify all American Jewry. Rabbi Wise’s grand vision was not realized; in its attempt to reach out to the largest number of Jews, his prayer book did not depart much from *siddurim* of the past; it was rejected by the children of German immigrants who were seeking a ritual that would reflect the tremendous changes in their own life-circumstance and religious practice.

The *Union Prayer Book* followed in 1895, representing the practices and ideologies of classical Reform. It removed prayers seeking a return to Zion and instead emphasized universalism, rejecting the notion of Jews as a chosen people. The *UPB* stressed decorum and formality in worship, clearly defining the roles and participation of rabbi, cantor, choir, and congregation. *Keva* was dominant; *kavanah* was nearly impossible to attain.

*Gates of Prayer*, published in 1975, responded to the creativity and ethnic pride of the 1960s as well as to the major historical events of the past decades. This *Siddur* used more Hebrew than the *UPB* and included ten different Friday night services, all reflecting various themes. It contained additional services for Holocaust Remembrance Day and Israeli Independence Day, as well as meditations and new prayers sprinkled throughout. *Keva* was now minimized; *kavanah* was a goal, but it was too scripted to be highly effective.

The small, gray edition of *Gates of Prayer* which we have used at Central Synagogue for the past decade, was meant as a temporary prayer book that would provide gender neutral language until the next version became available. We have now begun using the recently published *Mishkan T’Filah*, which seeks to balance *keva* and *kavanah*. It has a unique format, with each prayer spread over a double page. The right side gives the Hebrew prayer, fully transliterated and closely translated (*keva*) while the left side contains poems, creative prayers and writings explicating the theme (*kavanah*). Congregants can move through the service either together as a community, following the traditional prayer, or as individuals, focusing on its interpretive expression. *Mishkan T’Filah* has also reclaimed Amram bar Shesna’s addition of descriptions and teachings, which permits worshippers to learn more about the elements of the service and the ritual practices associated with specific prayers.

Jewish survival, both physical and spiritual has always depended upon our ancestors’ ability to renew and reinvent themselves, both as individuals and as a people. We have inherited that charge as well. Though change is sometimes frightening because we find comfort in the familiar, we should not think of *Mishkan T’Filah* as a radically new prayer book. It is but another step in the evolution of our human desire to reach out for what is sacred and of our Jewish need to affirm tradition within the embrace of community. *Siddurim* reflect the circumstances influencing our ritual, but ultimately they are springboards for our own offerings to God.

---

**Letters to the Editor**

“Thank you for HaShiur, easily the most stimulating Synagogue journal I have ever seen!”
  Rabbi Jeremy Rosen, London

“Kudos for producing a journal of ideas that manages to be interesting, lively, well-written, utterly uncondescending and handsomely designed. It is a stunning achievement.”
  Ravelle Brickman

“Congratulations on the new issue, new format… Critique: no humor (Jews do laugh or at least chuckle)... Suggestion: publication worthy of greater visibility.”
  Jerry Pickman

“The range of material (reviews, fiction, reflections) and the remarkable art work interspersed made for a rich panorama on Jewish memory. Judy and I are pleased to have been a part of this new editorial and design vision for HaShiur.”
  Neil Grill and Judy Smith
Today young Jews are moving back to the Lower East Side. Though these new urbanites return to the roots their families first set down at the tip of Manhattan and resume their worship in the same temple, they are not living in crowded tenements and their synagogue sparkles like a jewel freed from the dust of ages. What was once the epicenter of Jewish life in New York is now a crucible of polyglot, multi-cultural, multi-religious coexistence. While Jews observe the sacred precepts of the Sabbath, their Asian and Hispanic neighbors are busy pursuing commercial enterprise, and restaurants, bars, galleries, and boutiques cater to the devotees of cool at all hours of the day and night. Diversity has replaced homogeneity; the return to the place of their forebears finds it changed, altered by the imprint of others, which subtly impacts the newly burgeoning Jewish life. This current migration epitomizes the quintessential, concurrent rhythms of renewal: continuity, cyclical recurrence and change.

**Continuity** focuses on the preservation of the past; its gaze is directed backward, following the linear flow of time, intent on keeping the past alive in the present and renewing the spirit of old, to imbue it with new life commensurate with contemporary life. Our psychological need for continuity is foundational; intimately linked to our identity, it generates a sense of security and comfort as we build on the pillars of the past. The designation of part of the Lower East Side as historic district, for example, and the efforts of various preservation coalitions are testimony to the forces of continuity that enable the renewal of the past in the present. Likewise, the observance of spiritual and cultural traditions is born from the desire for perpetual continuity, which in itself becomes a form of consecration of the old in the new.

**Cyclical recurrence** attests to permanence within flux; its gaze revolves, bending the linear flow of time as it follows the cycle of the seasons, the days of the week, the hours of the day and night, the rising and setting of the constellations. The rhythm of their perpetual recurrence reassures us that, no matter what happens, a new day will dawn. Observing, for example, the rituals of the Sabbath, of Passover and Rosh Hashanah, of blessing the rise of the new moon each month, and, during Shavuot, the celebration of entering the covenant with God as a re-entering of the springtime of our relationship. All these are markers of cyclical renewal, islands of permanence in the river of time. Like the awareness of continuity, cyclical recurrence reassures and stabilizes.

**Change** documents the difference wrought by the flow of time; its gaze is directed forward, acknowledging that what was in the past, no longer appears quite the same in its present iteration, and will continue to exhibit new forms in the future. No sunrise is exactly as the one before, no ritual observance, no matter how prescribed, is ever the same. But as we seek to renew the past in the present and are buoyed by the signs of cyclical recurrence, we also have to concede that time has wrought change. For that reason we update our prayer books or add more music to the service. The changing needs of the present constituents influence everything, from the restoration of synagogues to the revitalization of neighborhoods. The Lower East Side perfectly showcases this kind of adaptive fluidity that is the hallmark of change.

The rhythms of renewal are dynamic; they restore, repair and revive; their current carries us from the past to the future, while their cyclical aspect assures us that the past is not lost. But above all, they teach us two lessons, both inherent in the rhythm of change: We cannot step into the same river twice and we have to embrace difference, which is the foundation of tolerance. As we observe the modulations wrought by the rhythms of renewal on the remainder of the past, we celebrate its rebirth in new form, as the sapling from a sacred tree in a changing grove.

*Amala Levine, Editor*
who want to live there and worship in the restored sanctuary of Chasam Sopher like their forefa-
thers did. At the same time, it is also one of the hottest neighbor-
hoods in New York, in terms of restaurants, boutiques and
nightlife.

What I love about New York is its density and diversity, all these things happening together to make it work as a city. In St. Paul, this would not be possible. I like going into neighborhoods that are on the edge; I like to be involved in providing the stimulus for change and in visualizing an image of what the area could or should become. The exciting thing is waiting for a vision to emerge.

Marvin H. Meltzer, AIA, is a founding partner of Meltzer/Mandl Architects, PC, which has been responsible for the creation of more than 10,000 units of luxury and affordable housing in the greater New York Metropolitan area. He received a Lifetime Achievement Award by the New York Society of Architects as well as a series of design awards for innovative work throughout NYC. His design for Melrose Court in the South Bronx was named the best in the country by the National Association of Home Builders.

Reading Suggestions: