

Kol Nidrei 5779
Rabbi Betsy Forester
The Purpose of Torah (on two feet)

The pre-eminent twelfth century Jewish scholar, Moses Maimonides, faced a conundrum. He had attracted a brilliant student, Yosef ben Yehudah, who came from far away to study under his tutelage. Maimonides thought highly of his student's thirst for knowledge and his insightfulness in probing the meaning of texts and writing his own prose and poetic verse. He grasp scientific theory easily and excelled in mathematics. Maimonides was impressed by Yosef's logical thinking and introduced him to higher-level, mystical and esoteric texts. Yosef probed the source and methodology of every one. Maimonides hoped that Yosef might become his protege, and so he developed a systematic plan to bring Yosef to the peak of intellectual prowess. And then-- Yosef left, his studies uncompleted. He seemed to have been looking for meaning that Maimonides did not provide.

Maimonides found himself perplexed. Where had he erred? What was Yosef looking for that Maimonides had missed? For many years, Maimonides pondered those questions before publishing the master work known as the *Moreh N'vuchim*, the *Guide for the Perplexed*. He opens the Guide with a letter to Yosef in which he writes, "Your absence has prompted me to compose this treatise for you and for those who are like you, however few they may be. I have divided it into chapters, each of which shall be sent to you as soon as it is completed. Shalom to you."

How many of us wish we'd had a teacher who felt so bad about letting us down that they would go to such lengths to correct their mistakes, in such form and substance? Imagine the angst that Maimonides felt as he wrote out a philosopher's response to the same questions we ask today: What is the meaning and purpose of our Bible? What point is there in following the *Mitzvot*, the Commandments?

Before Rosh HaShanah a group of us gathered here for *S'lichot*, and our discussion earlier in the evening focused around similar questions. I asked those assembled why they come here, and we talked about that and the purposes religion serves more broadly. A few days later, I received the following email from Jerry and Merle Sternberg:

Dear Rabbi Forester:

You asked why people believe that they go to synagogue. After giving the question more thought, we thought it would help, for our part, to put our answer in writing.

We go to synagogue on Shabbat and holidays to hear the stories of our people as we read the Torah and to examine the lessons learned, to celebrate the joy and peace of Shabbat, to find a deeper meaning in life, to maintain Jewish traditions that have been observed for thousands of years, and to be part of a vital and caring community.

We do this whether we are true believers in God, non-believers, or if we wrestle in our beliefs, because there is a strong connection between the Jewish people and our religious traditions and values.

We wish you and your family a happy and joyous Shana Tovah on the occasion of your first High Holidays as the Rabbi of Beth Israel in Madison.

Sincerely...

What a wonderful email! Having spent a lot of time studying what 21st century Jews believe, what they want, and how they gather, I can tell you that those words capture eloquently what I understand about why most Jews who go to synagogue do so.

And, as we are a traditional, Conservative shul, part of a Movement committed to *halachah*, Jewish law, and as we are living on the brink of what some predict will be a post-rabbinic age (and they're probably right) in which notions of obligation are shifting, I have to ask, what place do Jewish practices occupy in our lives? How, exactly, do we approach the *Mitzvot*? What, if anything, do we believe is expected of us as Jews?

The Kol Nidrei declaration forces us to face our frailty before the demands of a Torah-centered life. We know we could have done more. We know there were times when we could have tried harder. And as much as we'd like to think we'll do better next year, a taunting voice in our heads asks, why bother? Do the *mitzvot* really help us thrive in this world?

In his Guide, Maimonides attempts to reconcile Aristotelian philosophy with Torah. He offers rational ways of understanding biblical events that appear non-rational. The entire work, really, is a three-part letter to his former student. It was a sensation in its time and influenced the thinking of Jewish and Christian scholars alike, and it ignited controversy within the Jewish community despite its wide popularity, because it attacks literalism and also because it gives a more pragmatic explanation for the *Mitzvot*, the Commandments, than had been entertained by most Jewish interpreters up to that point. His pragmatic explanation for the *mitzvot* lands in the Guide's conclusion, in which Maimonides promotes his notion of the perfect and harmonious life in which we do God's will with a proper understanding of its purpose.

This is what he teaches:

The first priority of Torah is to promote the physical and social well-being of human beings. Torah helps us manage our relationships and steers us away from violence. Torah teaches us self-control and fosters care and commitment to the others and to the community at large. From Torah, we learn enduring values that enable us to get along with others and ensure

that all people have the things they need so that we can form a healthy society in which all can participate and all can thrive.

Once physical and communal well-being are established, the next goal of Torah is to promote the well-being of the soul. Each person learns to perfect their soul according to their own disposition and ability.

Only after those two conditions are met does the goal shift to building book knowledge. Maimonides puts scholarship and erudition on a higher level but cautions that good conduct and physical security and well being are the first and most critical purposes of Torah. He writes: The Law of our teacher Moses aims first at the establishment of good mutual relations among people by removing injustice and creating the noblest feelings. Secondly, it seeks to train us in faith, and to impart true and correct opinions.

Learning this was a big Wow for me. I had believed that the more Torah one learned, the more they were meeting the goal of knowing Torah. When I learned this section of the Guide I realized that I had been wrong. While I will always strive toward higher scholarship in Torah--I am, after all, a rabbi--I now understand that Torah flourishes when human beings flourish--when we take care one another and engage in positive and productive relationships. I believe that Maimonides offers a workable and inspiring approach to the Mitzvot that offers us opportunities to grow as human beings and bring more sanctity into our lives. Since I learned this piece it has become an organizing and energizing principle for me when I learn and teach Torah. Torah is not first and foremost about how smart we are; it is first and foremost about how good we are, how we thrive in a world with other people.

Rambam had missed the point with his student, Yosef, and lost him. We cannot afford to miss the point. Our broken world cries out for meaning, for compassion, for tenderness, for witnessing, for love. And we have a way of life that at its finest not only promotes those values but lives them out. It is

our pride, our treasure, and our sacred responsibility to align ourselves with Torah.

And because Torah tells us that it intended to live “in our mouths and in our hearts,” as we read two Shabbatot ago, we live it out on our terms. It has always been so. Our halachic practices are variously interpreted in different times and for different communities. And, as individuals, we make our own decisions about how to balance community standards with wherever we may be on our personal journeys. That does not mean that I think we should cherry-pick those mitzvot that appeal to us and leave the rest. For myself, I believe that I become a more mindful, disciplined, and creative person through my observance of mitzvot like Shabbat and Kashrut and even odd ones like *sha’atnez--not* wearing clothing made of blended linen and wool. Personal refinement and the building of a just, compassionate, and habitable world are the goals, and my experience suggests that we can build ourselves and build our world through Torah and mitzvot.

It has long been my practice at this time of year to think about how I can increase my observance of mitzvot because I have learned that they help make me a better person and enhance my capacity to serve others. I recommend that you consider how you will grow in Torah in the coming year.

Beth Israel Center offers many excellent ways for us to build flourishing lives both within and outside of the walls of our building through the performance mitzvot that meet our needs for meaning making, connection to others past and present, authentic text study, community service, personal growth, joy, and peace. I urge you to take advantage of those opportunities which include the following:

Number One: Daily minyan.

The daily minyan is the heart of a shul and an essential component of a healthy kahal that shows up for one another with constancy and

dependability. A dedicated group gathers here at least once every day to enable members of our kahal to connect to one another and to God. We daven and read Torah together and we give honors to one another. We celebrate special occasions together, grieve together, and observe yahrzeits together. You should know that we have members who go out of their ways to show up twice every day, rain or shine, so that we are here with a minyan for any of you who may need it. It is impossible to describe the feeling in the room when a member recites kaddish for their parent and the rest of us say “*y’hei shmei rabbah m’vorach*” knowing that were it not for the 9 or so others of us in the room, the mourner would not have had that opportunity to honor the memory of their loved one in the most authentically Jewish way.

Our minyan is a loving family with whom everyone here would be blessed to gather. It gives us a way to mark the transitions into day and into evening with people we care about. And our minyan needs your help. We do not always have the required 10 participants for a quorum. Evenings are especially difficult. And we all need it, to fulfill the mitzvah of communal davening and Torah reading and to reap the personal benefits of connection, community, and sanctity. Nothing beats a daily practice of davening with this loving group of people, but even committing to one day a week would help us greatly and it would help you, too.

As you spend the next 25 hours committing to raising the bar on your personhood and your connection to God, Torah, and the Jewish People, I urge you to make minyan attendance a priority in the coming year.

Number two: Social action.

We have an inspiring array of offerings that foster human connection with others as we fulfill our Jewish mission, bringing justice and compassion to our world and making it holy. We fulfill the mitzvot of opening our hands to the needy, welcoming the stranger, celebrating the dignity of all human beings as created in God’s image, and more. Look for a survey coming

soon that will help the social action committee focus on the most effective ways to help all of us build a better world. Meanwhile, ask how you can participate in our established projects. I am so proud to lead a kahal that expresses its Judaism in powerful activism, and I look forward to more kahal members getting involved in the coming year.

Number three: Adult Education.

An assortment of new classes will give you opportunities to think critically and build your sense of self as a Jew and a human being. All adults and teens are welcome. None of the classes will be lectures. They are all opportunities to roll up your sleeves--and I'll roll up mine,--to engage actively, and let yourself be moved by companionship, text, and the immersive process of unpacking original texts and letting them take up space in your mind, heart and soul. There will be opportunities to explore contemporary issues as they are addressed by the great scholars of our day and to join as a community to learn from and about the work of kahal members. There will be meditation retreats through Merchav HaLev, the Madison Center for Jewish Meditation, and Studio Sinai classes, also on Sundays, where we will engage in creative expression using artistic media in response to midrash. Talmud classes will probe small sections of text, in the original language, for deep knowing and meaning making. And, they will be followed by late evening mishmar, which is spirited singing, in anticipation of the coming Shabbat. Parasha study after kiddush will offer a focused angle on the weekly Torah portion. And we are also continuing with our 18-month Scientists in Synagogues project, in which we explore synergies and discontinuities between science and Torah.

Number four: Shabbat services and kiddush.

So much good happens here on Friday evenings and Shabbat mornings. Come and feel the power of community and belonging through ritual, singing, shmoozing, Torah learning, and celebrating over kiddush together, followed once a month by *z'mirot*, Shabbat singing. We are warm and welcoming community, newcomers are integrated quickly and eagerly, and

the davening is full of spirit and passion. If you haven't in awhile, come and experience it for yourself.

If you were to ask me how I would prioritize those four, I would have to tell you that they are equally important parts of a vibrant life that we are blessed to have inherited and molded to meet our needs, lift us up, and draw us closer to one another. Give them all a try, and keep coming back. You won't regret it.

And, of course, there are others opportunities to enrich your life through Jewish practices at BIC. We are making plans to expand the use of our beautiful mikvah. By mid-winter, you will hear about how the mikvah can add meaning to your life in creative ways that you never expected.

Each holiday offers its own opportunities to tap into who we are and what we need. Yom Kippur comes to us as a gift. These 25 hours invite us to put our deepest selves in conversation with the values and expectations the Jewish people have honed over the centuries. On this day we experience total submission and then we lift ourselves back up until we stand before the Open Ark at *Ne'ilah*, hoping we have gained insight into how we can grow and flourish.

On this night, I pray that we open our hearts to new ways to make Torah meaningful and purposeful in our lives. May we find within ourselves the honesty to see our lives clearly and the inspiration to take the next steps toward self-improvement and the betterment of our world.