

Annual Report
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As always, our Annual Meeting falls during *Sifirat Ha-Omer*, the seven weeks, or more precisely, the 50 days, between the second night of Passover and the Festival of Shavuot. It is during this time that the Torah instructs us concerning the counting of the *omer*. It is traditionally a time of mourning and thus, subdued celebration. The Talmud states that during the time of Rabbi Akiva, 24,000 of his students died from a divine-sent plague during the counting of the Omer. The Talmud then goes on to say that this was because they did not show proper respect to one another, befitting their level; they begrimed each other the spiritual levels attained by their comrades.

After the death of Rabbi Akiva's 24,000 students, he taught just five students, among them Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai who went on to become the greatest teacher of Torah in his generation.

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai is purported to have authored the Zohar, the major text of Kabbalah, Jewish Mysticism, although most critical scholars consider it the work of the 13th century Jewish writer Moses de Leon. According to tradition, on the day of bar Yochai's death, he revealed the deepest secrets of the Kabbalah. Indeed these days are seen as a celebration of the giving of the hidden, mystical Torah through Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, as a parallel to Shavuot, which celebrates the giving of the revealed Torah through Moses. There is a source in the Kabbalah that Moses was reincarnated as Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai to give this mystical element of the Torah to the Jewish people. I'll come back to *Sefirat Ha-Omer* in a moment.

Each year, this Annual Meeting gives me the time to reflect on how have I used my rabbinate to fulfill my goals of bringing Judaism into the lives of everyone in our congregation. With the help of the committee chairs and other tireless members of the congregation, together we strive to make Temple Emanu-El a strong congregation in the three traditional roles of the synagogue: as a *beit tefilah*, a house of prayer, a *beit midrash*, a house of study and a *beit knesset*, a house of gathering.

The year 5774 has been a year of strengthening our commitment to Judaism and the Jewish people by expressing that commitment in our congregation in all three areas. Our members again have had the opportunity to bring a *beit tefilah*, a *beit midrash* and a *beit knesset* into their lives.

As a *beit tefilah*, a house of prayer, Temple Emanu-El strives to meet the spiritual needs of its members of diverse Jewish backgrounds. Our use of different *siddurim*, different prayerbooks, reflects the pluralism in our community and our commitment to *k'hal Yisrael*, the oneness and unity of the Jewish people. Our continued use of the revised version of Siddur Sim Shalom, the prayerbook of the Conservative movement for our Shabbat morning and festival services reflects part of our diversity. For several years now we have been also using another new *Siddur*, Mishkan T'filah, the *siddur* of our Reform movement. Both *siddurim* incorporate gender-inclusive language in the Hebrew and gender-neutral language in the English and together both *siddurim* reflect the diversity of religious practice here at Temple Emanu-El.

Under the direction of our cantorial soloist, Mindy Harris, the Temple Emanu-El Makheila (choir) continues to meet regularly. They sang on the High Holy Days, at the annual Martin Luther King service, at our Annual Yom Ha-Shoah Community Service and the Makheila is busy preparing for the Annual Membership Recognition Service (which includes the installation of new Board members and the tribute to our Volunteers of the Year) on May 31st at 7:00 pm. Mindy will always welcome new voices to join the choir. If you're interested in a wonderful spiritual experience, contact Mindy about becoming a member of the Temple Emanu-El Makheila.

Mindy tutors our Bar/Bat Mitzvah students and co-leads the Shabbat morning service of each Bar/Bat Mitzvah. Each young person has told me how much they enjoy studying with Mindy and having her help lead services on their special day. Of course, Mindy participates in our holiday services on which *Yizkor*, personal prayers in memory of our loved ones, is recited – our next one being on the 2nd day of Shavuot, Thursday, June 5th at 9:30 am.

A few years ago, we amended our religious practice of having services on the 2nd day of *yom tov*, that is days on which work is traditionally prohibited. While the Temple Office would remain closed, we decided to no longer hold religious services on those days on which the majority of Diaspora Jewry consider to be *yom tov*. Specifically, I am speaking about the 2nd day of Sukkot, the day of Simchat Torah and the 2nd day of Passover. This year the status of religious services on the first day of *yom tov*; specifically, the 1st day of Sukkot, the 1st and 7th days of Passover and the 1st day of Shavuot have been called into question – not by a committee but by the lack of attendance. It has been very difficult having a service on those days and those who do come are doing so because they feel they need to in order for the service to take place and not because they want to. (There are less than a handful who really “want to.”) A couple of weeks ago during Passover, we did not hold a service on the 1st day, the 2nd day and 7th day; we did have a service on the 8th day when *Yizkor* is recited and I’m happy to say that we had a slightly larger congregation than we’ve had in the past – perhaps because it was the only Passover morning service we held. We do have at least a *minyan* on the other 2 days of *yom tov* on which *Yizkor* is received, namely on Shemini Atzeret (the 8th day of Sukkot), and the 2nd day of Shavuot. It is my intention to have services on the 1st day of Shavuot – Wednesday, June 4th because one of the most important Torah readings takes place on that day – *Z’man Matan Torahteinu*, the day on which we received the Torah at Mt. Sinai – we read the Ten Commandments. I say “we” because our tradition teaches that we were all present at Mt. Sinai. Needless to say, the Torah is the very foundation upon which Jewish life is based, we will have a service on the 1st day of Shavuot so that we can reenact that day in the wilderness of Sinai, which transformed our ancestors from being a 12 clans wandering in the desert into a strong and united nation on a sacred journey returning to their homeland. Lack of attendance is not a problem unique to Temple Emanu-El. Many congregations, especially in the Reform movement and even some in the Conservative movement are grappling with this problem.

In the area of Religious Practices, our Tot Shabbat program continues, the next one being this coming Friday (May 9th) at 6:00 pm. The children along with their parents and, in some cases, older siblings and in some cases grandparents, and in some cases friends enjoy being together and they enjoy the fine programming done by Debbi Levasseur.

As a *beit midrash*, Temple Emanu-El offered its members many opportunities to study this year. From the Sunday morning adult education lectures (with breakfast), to the continuing Basic Judaism Class, the annual class on Learn Hebrew In Less Than a Week and the weekly Shabbat Shiur (Torah Study Class), there are many opportunities to study. The Shabbat Shiur enjoys studying *Parashat Ha-Shavua*, the weekly Torah portion, often on the subject raised in the weekly Shavuon which I send to everyone in the community whose e-mail address I have. Once a month, the Shabbat Shiur becomes the Israel Chavurah during which we discuss issues concerning Israel and the Middle East and on which we often have heated discussions as everyone who feels passionately about the issue at hand shows why he or she should be Prime Minister of the State of Israel! The next Israel Chavurah is scheduled for this Saturday, May 10th.

This year’s Sunday morning Adult Education series began in September with a program titled “Jewish Music or World Music: From the Ghetto to Broadway” The film “Broadway Musicals – A Jewish Legacy” was shown followed by a discussion. In October, author Stuart Tower, who resides in California, spoke on his book Branco. In November, we joined with hundreds of thousands of Jews worldwide in the Annual Global Day of Jewish Learning. In March, Dr. Ira Silver spoke on “The Increase of Inequality in America” and made available his book Giving Hope: How You Can Restore the American Dream. A week ago, Adult Education Co-Chairs Rhoda and Fred Feldman led a workshop on “Finding Your family: From Beginning To Advanced Jewish Genealogy” during which my family was one of the examples of genealogical research. The next Adult Education program will be a Field trip to the Yiddish Book Center in Amherst on Sunday, June 1st. There will be a tour of the Center and a musical program entitled “Mak’hela: Celebration of Psalms.” The trip is open to everyone with or without children. If you are interested in going, please let Fred and Rhoda Feldman know.

Once again, adult members of the congregation were invited to attend the Family Education adult classes for parents in Grades 3 & 4 taught by myself and by Gail (Korinow). Gail's class this year was about "Family Mishigas in the Bible" while my class was on "Jewish Views of Life After Death." The topics of these classes are announced in the weekly Shavuon and everyone in our community is invited to attend.

And please read Fred Feldman's comprehensive description of our Adult education this year in his Adult Education Committee report for even more details on the year's programs.

Finally, as a *beit knesset*, a house of gathering, Temple Emanu-El is a place where Jewish identity and Jewish values are expressed by the many opportunities to become involved. This year the Social Committee once again helped organize our annual Yom Kippur Break-Fast, Chanukah party and the now Annual Indoor Picnic. The Committee also helped make *latkes* for the Chanukah party and baked *hamantaschen* for our Purim celebration.

The Chesed Committee, chaired by Sharyn Russell has successfully helped Temple members in time of need through its sacred work. The Chesed Committee has successfully helped many home-bound members of Tempel Emanu-El feel a part of our sacred, caring community. The Chesed Committee this year once again helped the Social Committee to make *latkes* on Chanukah and *hamantaschen* on Purim. They then delivered the *latkes* and *mishloach manot* to home-bound members of the Temple. For several months this year the Chesed Committee helped the Kobey family of six with ready-made meals during the time that Jenn was undergoing chemotherapy. The Committee successfully launched its page on Lotsa Helping Hands to enable members of the Temple to see where help is needed and to sign up to volunteer to help. If you have not yet signed up for Lotsa Helping Hands, please do so Nancy, Sharyn Russell, Fred Feldman or I will be happy to guide you on how to sign up. There is no obligation once you do sign up but the rewards are great if and when you volunteer. Also, the Chesed Committee encourages everyone to make use of the Temple Directory, easily accessed on the Home Page of our Temple website, under the drop-down menu under "Membership." If you do not know the password, contact Nancy in the Temple Office and she will gladly give it to you. If you are interested in helping the Chesed Committee in its sacred work, call the Temple Office or Sharyn Russell directly.

This brings me to my next point. By a unanimous vote of the officers of Temple Emanu-El, Rhoda and Fred Feldman have been named as our "Volunteers of the Year" and will be honored during our Membership Recognition and Installation Service on Friday evening, June 13th at 7:00 P.M.. Both Rhoda and Fred, volunteer literally hours each week, to bringing quality programming of diverse types to the members of Temple Emanu-El. Mark your calendars now – be here on Friday, June 13th to honor our "Volunteers of the Year," Rhoda and Fred Feldman!

That same evening, I will have the opportunity to install the new officers of the congregation and the newly elected members of the Board of Directors. At this time I want to commend Lynn Dreyfuss Martin who has served our congregation as its President during this, her second of a two year term. Please join me in expressing our thanks for her leadership and the leadership of our Temple Executive Committee and Board of Directors.

Finally, I want to thank the staff of Temple Emanu-El for being the team players that they are and that make our congregation quite unique. Nancy LaFleur works tremendously hard in her position as Temple Administrator. As Religious School Principal, Debbi Levasseur works timelessly to make sure that our Religious School children have a quality Jewish education in a fun and caring environment. Both Nancy and Debbi work hard in their positions. I appreciate all that they do to help me, even as I appreciate all the hard work that Cheryl Hill, our Religious School Administrative Assistant, and that Kim Giannopoulos does as our Bookkeeper. And Mindy Harris, our soloist, brings the joy of Jewish learning and Jewish music into the lives of many in our community.

We are truly blessed to have such a staff. As we all know, meeting the financial obligations of our temple is always a challenge with which the Board of Directors grapples all the time. Even with a modest salary increase (for most the first in 4 years), Temple Emanu-El remains well below the median for congregations our size which includes dozens of Reform synagogues in places where the

cost of living is considerably lower than here. Despite this fact, the staff we have remains committed to maintaining a congregation which is a beacon for both a viable and thriving Jewish life in the Merrimack Valley of Massachusetts and southern New Hampshire.

Now, as promised, back to Sefirat Ha-Omer. Traditionally, beginning on the 2nd night of Passover during the *seder*, this period of the *omer* is counted – 50 days until the major holiday of Shavuot. However, this countdown is far from typical. At this time of the year, children (and many teachers, too!) count down until the end of the school year. Only 24 days until summer vacation. Then, only 23 days until summer vacation and so on... However, the countdown to Shavuot during the Sefirat Ha-Omer is not a count-down, but rather it is a count-up. At the 2nd *seder* we say, "This is the 1st day of the Omer." On the next evening we say, "This is the 2nd day of the Omer" and so on... Why do we count up to Shavuot and not count down? As you'd expect, the rabbis had an answer! They said that in matters of *kedusha* (holiness), we only increase in number and never decrease. (Similarly, the rabbis ruled in favor of Hillel who said we should light one candle on the 1st night of Chanukah, 2 on the 2nd night etc... while Shammai said we should light 8 candles the 1st night, 7 the 2nd night and so on. We follow the way of Hillel because, as the rabbis said, in this matter of *kedusha*, we increase in number and not decrease.)

It is appropriate to conclude with the ritual of reciting the blessing for counting the *omer*, as we traditionally do during these 7 weeks between Passover and Shavuot. In reciting it, we do so counting the many blessings that we have as a community of committed Jews to the survival of our people. (Please rise.)

Baruch Ata Adonai, Eloheynu Melech ha-olam, asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav, v'tzivanu al sefirat ha-omer. Blessed are You, Lord our God, Ruler of the universe, who has sanctified us through commandments and commanded us to count the Omer.

Hayom arbaim yom she-haym chamisha shavuot v'chamisha yom la-omer. Today is the 19th day, which is 2 weeks and 5 days of the Omer.

May we at Temple Emanu-El continue to increase our blessings and continue to go from strength to strength!