

EMPOWER US

There is a Chassidic saying that "the real exile of the people of Israel in Egypt was that they learned to endure it? Today, we stand once more at the edge of the sea yearning to free ourselves from apathy and despair. Source of Courage, do not let us be paralyzed by fear, nor stuck in our complacency. Move us to act for our own sake and on behalf of others, with all our spiritual strength and moral intelligence. Empower us to challenge and change the corruption; to feel the courage of David as he faced Goliath; and to believe that we can and we will make justice prevail. May this be Your will.

The Chassidic saying is attributed to Rabbi Hanoah Heynech Hakohen Levin of Alexander (1790-1870)

ONE HUNDRED BLESSINGS

The Rabbinic tradition (Talmud M'nachot 43a) advises us to recite one hundred blessings a day. While that may seem an impossible number, if we stop throughout the day to express our wonder and gratitude, we may find ourselves reciting even more. For the hope of a new day, for the tiniest seed of optimism, for a kernel of creativity, we give thanks to You.

OUR RESPONSIBILITIES

Here, indeed, is an option worthy of our best efforts and noblest strivings:

To believe that we are fashioned in the image of God, and possessed, therefore, of infinite dignity and worth. That we share with our Creator in the tasks of creation, in the building of a society in which human beings are encouraged to fulfill themselves in creative ways, to rise to their full stature as children of God, and to dwell together in justice and understanding, in freedom and peace. Here are goals within the reach of our minds and hearts and hands. Though we may not witness their fulfillment in our day and time, to believe in them is our destiny and to labor for them is our responsibility. And in that enterprise life finds its deepest and fullest and holiest meaning.

RABBI'S WELCOME

Shaar Zahav, the Golden Gate, is one name for the Eastern gate of Jerusalem.

Located close to the Temple Mount, the Golden Gate was sealed shut in the sixteenth century.

We LGBTQ Jews know how it feels to have gateways blocked and doors closed.

How many of us have been blocked from entering a synagogue as our own, out selves? Even in the many congregations we are now welcome to enter, most of us cannot open our prayer books and find our lives reflected there.

The sages knew that we need not wait for the Temple to be rebuilt to adapt and evolve our practice. Like them, we can open the Golden Gate ourselves, making our liturgy relevant and compelling to our lives.

A prayer book captures the time and place in which it is put together. When I first came to Congregation Shaar Zahav, I found a diversity of Jews I had never seen before: motorcycle dykes with helmets still on, transfolks of all genders and orientations, multiracial couples and families, gorgeous gay men decked in leather, a woman in a wheelchair on the bimah, giving the drash - here, finally, I had found what the words ahavah rabbah, God's great love, really mean.

We are each made b'tzelem Elohim, in the image of God. This book is not afraid to name the deepest human experiences. It invites us, all of us, to stand naked before God, to see - and to be seen.

Based as we are in San Francisco, our name, Shaar Zahav, the Golden Gate, also refers to our famous bridge. We pray that this book can become a bridge between isolation and community, connecting LGBTQ Jews and our allies everywhere to the Jewish tradition.

We pray that this book can become a bridge over time, from the past when we were made to feel marginalized and excluded to a future when we can be in honest dialogue with God, with our full selves, and with the world in which we live.

Kein Y'hi Ratzon, May it be so,

RABBI CAMILLE SHIRA ANGEL

SONGS, STORIES, AND HUMOR

The great doctor, Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon (Maimonides) offered this prescription: In order to strengthen the vital powers, one should employ musical instruments, and tell patients gay stories which will make the heart swell, and narratives that will distract the mind and cause them and their friends to laugh.

Healer of the sick, give us the songs, stories, and sense of humor to lift up those who are sick, if only for a short while. Enable us to make Your healing Presence manifest as we reach out to those who need us.

ON KOHELET 3:2-8

A time to be born
And a time to die
A time to plant
And a time to pluck up that
A time to kill
And a time to heal
A time to break down
And a time to build up
A time to weep
And a time to laugh
A time to mourn
And a time to dance
A time to cast away stones,
And a time to gather stones together,
A time to embrace
And a time to refrain from embracing
A time to seek
And a time to lose
A time to keep
And a time to cast away
A time to collect
And a time to share
A time to keep silent
And a time to speak
A time to love
And a time to hate
A time for war
And a time for peace

again and again as we live.
again and again as we live.
seeds for the future
which has been planted in the past.
that which harms us,
and overcome the harm.
barriers between loved ones
hope for the journey to come.
in joy,
in pain.
for what will not be,
for what can be.
weapons of ignorance and mistrust,
pearls of wisdom and compassion.
live and living,
and brace oneself in solitude.
a friend
a part of yourself to another.
even that which hurts,
even that which comforts.
mementos from travels near and far,
one's treasures with others.
when there are no words,
when there can be no silence.
in spite of time,
in spite of strength.
with God,
with God.

MEDITATIVE ELOHAI N'TZOR (Personal Prayer)

Merciful God, during those times in my life when I suffer, grant me the strength to endure the challenges I face, even as I may feel provoked and angry. Give me a gentle tongue to refrain from responding with slander. Help me to remember that thrashing in a sea of hostile impulses will only lead me to spiritual drowning, when instead I can choose to swim toward the safety of Your shelter.

(Rabbi Angel's Addition)

Dear God, Source of sustenance, Believer in my essential goodness and potential - be with me as I grow, as I become more aligned with my true nature. Help me tap into my inner reservoirs of strength, courage, and wisdom. Embolden my resolve to take care of myself, my body, and my spirit, so that I may continue to be of service to You and to those whose well-being I so cherish. Thank You for Your precious gifts of life and love, and for my tender heart, which is in Your care. Blessed are You, Source of sustenance.

Introduction to Torah Service

The center of Jewish liturgy and study is the reading of words that are at least 3,000 years old. Not only the content of Torah but its form is ancient as well. We keep the Torah in a deliberately archaic form, a parchment scroll that is written painstakingly by hand; we keep these words in their original language-Hebrew; and we chant them in a traditional melody that has been passed down for many generations.

Some ideas in the Torah show a very different understanding of the universe than our own; they are like a window into the world of 3,000 years ago. Other ideas were progressive, even revolutionary, when the Torah was written, and remain so even in our own time. Torah sets forth ideals and dreams that we have yet to reach even in the present day. Torah commands us to pursue justice, to work for peace, to love the stranger, the one who is not like me. Torah inspires us to demand a society that is radically egalitarian, in which the Law ensures that there will be an equitable distribution of resources and no one will go hungry.

Torah instructs us to care for the natural environment and to cultivate it like a garden, Torah reminds us to be sensitive and compassionate toward all life, including the smallest creatures. Torah teaches us that every person is made in the Divine image and is deserving of respect, regardless of race, intellect, Physical capacity, gender, sexual orientation, or appearance. Torah calls us to free those who are enslaved, to protect the young, and to have reverence for the old. Torah demands that each of us break out of the circle of self-concern and join in community, living life focused on the goal of creating a better world.

FOR LEAVE-TAKING

With joy and sorrow, holding you in your excitement and anxiety, we launch you on this journey.

May God bless all your choices. May it be the will of God to place love and awe in your heart. May the awe of God be before you all the days of your life, so that you will love goodness and seek justice. May you delight in words and music, in life and in love. May you know, even in the moments when you feel most alone and unheard, that there are those of us who care very much about you, and would ease your sorrow if we could. May your reasons to celebrate far exceed your reasons to grieve but may you find the wisdom and strength and support you need to do both.

We thank God for you, for you have been a gift to our community. May you take our affection and appreciation on the journey ahead. And may you know true peace, shalom, in your heart and in the world. Amen.

FOR NEW CONGREGANTS

Leader:

We welcome our new congregants. May you find community here, people who share your aspiration, and yearnings. May this synagogue help invigorate your commitment to God, Torah, and the heritage of Israel.

New Members:

We respond as did our ancestors to the call for renewal: Hineni - I am here.

Here to join the search for holiness, here to work for the improvement of our world in the quest for *tikkun olam*.

Congregation:

May the One who blessed our ancestors bless our community and all who work to secure God's realm on earth

New Members:

Therefore, O God, bless us all, give meaning to our lives and substance to our hopes: help us to understand those about us and fill us with the desire to be of service.

Together:

Let us remember that we depend on one another; quicken our hearts and hands to lift each other up, and teach us to make our words of prayer fruitful by deeds of loving-kindness. Amen.

HELP US TO BE HEALERS

On this day, we commemorate the ongoing tragedy that the global epidemic of AIDS is causing in our world. The AIDS crisis continues in part because of the inability of the peoples of the world, our governments, and our business leaders to see the millions struggling with HIV / AIDS as people of infinite value, each with a unique spark of the Divine.

When we look at people who are affected by HIV / AIDS, let us see them as Judaism would have us see them. Let us recognize their divinity, and help them to get the education, the medicines, the treatment, and the lives they deserve. Every person is created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26).

Dear God, we call You the Healer of the sick. Help us to be healers; be with us as we climb the ladder of justice and loving-kindness, of *tzedek* and *chesed*. Enable us to see ourselves as messengers from on high, capable of enacting radical healing, here and everywhere.

FOR OUR TEACHERS

Grateful for your service to this community, we give thanks to God for all those who transmit Torah, the Torah of our texts and the Torah of our lives. You are our gardeners.

Our teacher Rabbi Yoel Kahn taught: "In our orchard, some of us will plant the trees; others of us will take the seedlings under our care. Some will water and feed the saplings; others will shape and guide their growth. Some will stand at the gates, always watching over; others will visit at special occasions of the year. All who have tended this orchard, whether or not we live to see the day when our trees come into flower, shall be blessed by the harvest?

As each of us grows, let us take pride in knowing that we are planting trees that will outlive us and feed generations to come. We thank God for the obligation to transmit Torah. Blessed be the Source of Life, whose Divine Spark links us together over all time as one continuous chain of tradition

FINAL CONFESSIONAL

I acknowledge before You, Eternal One, my God and God of my ancestors, that both my healing and my death are in Your hands. If I have offended or hurt anyone, I beg forgiveness. May my death be an atonement for all the hurts I have caused, intentionally or unintentionally. May You, the Parent of orphans, protect my dear ones with whose souls my own soul is bound up. Into Your hand I entrust my spirit. Redeem me, Eternal One, God of truth.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Outreach

Taken from Reflections on a Rabbinate by Rabbi Robert Levine

Naches for My Nachshon

Rabbi Camille Shira Angel

Rabbi-in-Residence, University of San Francisco

(served as Rabbi in Congregation Rodeph Sholom from 1995 to 2000)

Dear Robert,

In the spring of 2020, I was looking forward to being with you and receiving the warmth of your rabbinic blessing on the occasion of receiving my honorary doctorate and celebrating 25 years as a rabbi and teacher among the Jewish people. I was as much anticipating your warm hands upon my head, hearing you riff on the Priestly Benediction as only you can do, as I was being with my classmates, family, and friends flying in from all corners, to recreate the love fest that began my rabbinate on the Upper West Side at Congregation Rodeph Sholom in the fall of 1995.

Back in the spring of 1995, with the backdrop of *Don't Ask Don't Tell* and the initiation of the Defense of Marriage Act, and with only two placements in mainstream Reform congregations of out and proud lesbian rabbis that I knew of, I set out to interview with thirteen congregations from Southern California to Scarsdale, Chappaqua to South Miami, Cincinnati to Chicago, to name a few. As I cast my net wide, I figured with each iteration I would improve my interviewing abilities and simultaneously “take one for the team,” meaning my lesbian sisters and gay brothers in seminary, who needed someone to be like *Nachshon**¹ and part the seas of religious-based homophobia and later transphobia, and otherness in general. If I got a few bites, I'd have a few choices. So, I traveled to thirteen synagogues and met with thirteen Rabbinic Search Committees all within a few weeks.

The behind-the-scenes deliberations in those search committee meetings ought to have been recorded. Such minutes would belong in Rabbi Angel's Circle of Elders' Archives, housed at the University of San Francisco, a Jesuit Catholic setting, a nexus for socially progressive and interfaith values. I teach there now and serve as USF's first Rabbi-in-Residence. My many full-time responsibilities include teaching privileges. I teach two popular courses, both of which satisfy core requirements, in ethics and in community-engaged learning. My classes are mostly filled with non-Jews and a mix of undergraduates. Many of them have never met a rabbi, let

¹ Nachshon is the Midrashic figure, who takes the first leap of action as he steps into the Red Sea and with his act of faith, the waters part and the dry land appears and the Israelites are able to escape bondage from 400 years of slavery.

alone a lesbian rabbi. It's never been a better time in history for a lesbian rabbi to teach *Queering Religion* at a Catholic University. But it's in the other class I teach, *Honoring Our*

LGBTQIA Elders, that I am establishing the Rabbi Angel's Circle of Elders Archives, hosted by the Swig Program in Jewish Studies and Social Justice.

The Swig Program in Jewish Studies and Social Justice is dedicated to preserving the stories of early thought leaders and change agents, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, asexual, intersex, as well as a religious identity, such as Jews and other seekers of a spiritual path focused on social justice.

These archives collect and tell the stories of how we found ourselves, realizing our intersectionality and sense of belonging—in no small part because of men like you, Robert, who in a few metropolitan cities across America became the “first,” the Nachshon among their colleagues, to take the risk of a lifetime. I know at least of a few instances in which colleagues found themselves on the wrong side of their board of governors and it cost them their contracts. Many of your contemporaries, Robert, were on the cusp, not sure about whether to proceed. But you were out in front, a feminist and a deep heart and brilliant community organizer. You were willing to take a chance on me and to have the faith and confidence in yourself to guide the congregation and a multi-generational community, with a Reform Jewish Day School, as well.

Oy! Do you remember the fiasco with my teach-in with the faculty of our Day School? The Day School leadership were none too pleased that I had used my two-hour slot to educate about how we can introduce gay and lesbian identities into the classroom as early as elementary school. I screened the award-winning documentary, *It's Elementary*. I was called in about the appropriateness and my judgment was questioned. Seems obvious now but it sure wasn't then. I did believe then as I do now that the earlier we can introduce our Jewish values of equality and recognize that LGBTQIA+ people are created *B'tzelem Elohim*, that each person in all their identities is created in God's image, the more likely we stand the chance of fulfilling those aspirational words.

And now, look at what we've spawned. Who says there's but one way to be fruitful and multiply? We have generated new thinking, new rituals, new liturgy, new *teshuvot*—answers to old and new questions, new—radical at once rooted and cutting edge. We LGBTQIA+ rabbis have brought so many gifts to Judaism and Jews and Justice. In the process, we found allies and created partnerships across faith, race, and class.

The extraordinary work we are doing integrating human rights rooted in Judaism with interfaith progressive social justice values is impacting countless people in a Jesuit Catholic setting. When asked to reflect on what the last 25 years have been like in terms of inclusion and progress and success, I think of where I began, where you and I began, and how far we've come. Neither of us could have imagined, for instance, that the *Kiddushin*, the Jewish wedding that you performed

would come to be recognized as legal and binding by the United States Supreme Court fifteen years later.

You are a social justice action figure hero to me. You ensured that the Rodeph Sholom family would be known as a warm and welcoming, LGBTQIA+ inclusive congregation; that our whole lives matter. Perhaps the one memory that stands out above many, both for me and for the life of Congregation Rodeph Sholom, was the night of my *auf ruf*, when you placed your hands on my head and riffed on the Priestly Benediction:

*May the gift of love that God has placed between you grow and strengthen;
May God's countenance shine upon you and protect you;
May you know the manifold blessings of peace.*

Then all at once, joyful sounds erupted in the Sanctuary full of people singing and clapping and genuinely expressing their good wishes. It lasted for a good long time as I recall and it was evident love had triumphed.

I was not the only lesbian rabbi you would hire to serve Congregation Rodeph Sholom. But I was definitely the first. Over the years, I have loved picking up the phone and asking for your ideas and wise counsel and occasionally teasing you about your penchant for hiring the strongest assistants as possible, so many of whom have been lesbians. I can't help but feel a kind of juicy *naches* for the Nachshon, my mentor and friend Robert N. Levine. You've been a beloved advisor and even a long-distance rabbi to my own dear daughter, Lilah Rose. May the years ahead be fruitful—and your good ideas and legacy multiply. You have helped to repair the covenant beyond our collective imagination and in this way among other ways, you have distinguished yourself and made your rabbinate a blessing.

In friendship and with gratitude,
Camille Shira