

Parashat Re'eh, Deuteronomy 11:26-16:17

PARASHAH OVERVIEW

- God places both blessing and curse before the Israelites. They are taught that blessing will come through the observance of God's laws. (11:26–32)
- Moses' third discourse includes laws about worship in a central place (12:1–28); injunctions against idolatry (12:29–13:19) and self-mutilation (14:1–2); dietary rules (14:3–21); and laws about tithes (14:22–25), debt remission (15:1–11), the release and treatment of Hebrew slaves (15:12–18), and firstlings (15:19–23).
- Moses reviews the correct sacrifices to be offered during the Pilgrim Festivals—Pesach, Sukkot, and Shavuot.

Moses instructs the Chosen People to eradicate any remnant of idolatry and strengthen all aspects of service to G-d. All offerings must be brought to the "Chosen" place, the Bet Hamikdash, so that worship is an act of humility and selflessness, rather than a self-indulging "need". An even greater danger to our uniqueness is the innate desire to compromise and assimilate Torah values with other forms of worship. (the Chanukah bush syndrome)

Moses forewarned the Jews against incorporating any pagan practices, and against the false prophet, idolatrous missionaries, and the Ir Hanidachas - the Apostate City. These must be destroyed along with their material belongings. When using the world in accordance with the wishes of the Creator, we declare the existence of a Creator who has a divine purpose for creating the material world. When we misuse the physical in the service of "gods who are not G-d", we negate the Creator's purpose for creating the universe. Therefore, they and all their belongings must be destroyed.

The remainder of the Parsha,h details those Mitzvos that set us apart from all other nations: Kashrus; Maasros - Tithes; the Shmitah - sabbatical year; the laws regarding lending money; the Eved Ivri - a Jew who is a slave; the consecration of the first born animal, and a review of the main Yomim Tovim - holidays: Pesach, Shavouth, and Succoth.

To Bless or Not to Bless, That Is the Question

Lori Sagarin

In this week's portion, Moses approaches the end of his life and continues the presentation and review of dozens of ritual and civil laws.

In the verses preceding the text above, he tells the Israelites that if they do follow God's commandments, there will be no needy among them, and if they don't follow the commandments, the needy will surely be among them. But here in these focal point verses, Moses tells the Israelites that even if they are righteous and follow God's laws, there may still be needy among them. So God prescribes the commandment to care for the needy.

This is not the first time that the Torah instructs us to care for the needs of those in our midst. Rather, the Torah reminds us continually of the responsibility of the community toward individuals in need. In fact, we are reminded so often of this fundamental obligation that we elevate this commandment as one of the highest mitzvot. In the Babylonian Talmud, Bava Batra 9a, we read, "Tzedakah outweighs all other mitzvot."

The giving of tzedakah is one of the first Jewish obligations that we educators teach. Our youngest children are welcomed to our programs through the creation of classroom tzedakah boxes or posters that chart the collection progress. In this way we begin to teach our

children to "open your hand and lend whatever is sufficient to meet the need" (Deuteronomy 15:8).

In fact, I would guess that many of us link the earliest memories of our own religious education to the Hebrew School ritual of collecting tzedakah in some form or another. I remember collecting JNF stamps—akin to S&H Green Stamps of the day—with quarters brought in each week to go toward the planting of a tree in Israel. And I recall the coin holders from Bartons Candy, with accompanying posters of great Jewish heroes!

In this week's portion we are told both "do not harden your heart" and "open your hand." In good classic pedagogical form, the Torah gives us the lesson and a corresponding action to reinforce the lesson. The Israelites were better able to grasp this and other concepts because of this methodology, which takes law and expands it to a relevancy that the law alone may not have, either for the ancient Israelites or, even more so, for those of us living in modernity.

When we hear the term "hardened heart" it immediately echoes the story of Passover and the action of God "hardening" Pharaoh's heart. But "heart hardening" is not reserved just for Pharaoh. The world is filled with hardened hearts. Almost daily, we are confronted with stories in the evening news, newspaper articles, or even direct mail that remind us of the pain that exists in the world. We hear and read these stories continually, and yet most of us go on with our lives able to successfully compartmentalize the "news" from that which genuinely affects us. In a world filled with

so much tragedy, we have become used to shutting off the ambient noise of pain and suffering. Every one of us is guilty of this at one time or another. Our constant challenge is to find ways to contribute to healing the world's ills in ways that are meaningful, realistic, and appropriate.

For many years, I have worn bracelets on my arm to signify my commitment to a cause. I began wearing my first such bracelet in the early 1970s. It contained the name of a soldier missing in action in the Vietnam War. My next bracelet bore the name of a Soviet refusenik, and one after that—the only one I still wear—is in memory of my friends who succumbed to AIDS. Wearing “cause” bracelets has become an international phenomenon. My daughter Eliana, like many children, has a vast collection. Her bat mitzvah project included selling bracelets to raise money and awareness for a disease called eocinophilic disease. After much research, she settled on this cause as meaningful, realistic, and appropriate. She knew that she couldn't repair the whole world, but that through her commitment of time and energy, she could begin with a small corner of it.

Peculiarly, there is no b'rachah for giving tzedakah, for “opening one's hand.” According to the Rashba (Spanish rabbi, 1235–1310), commenting on Deuteronomy 15:8, unlike most other positive biblical commandments—such as lighting Shabbat candles and reciting Havdalah—tzedakah requires another person's action to fulfill it. If a mitzvah requires two people—in this case, the giver and the recipient—the giver doesn't say a b'rachah, lest the recipient say he or she doesn't want help. Saying a b'rachah in this circumstance would mean that the giver had needlessly pronounced God's name (story cited in Mikraot Ramah [Conover, WI: Camp Ramah, 1999], p. 140). There is even no b'rachah for putting money in a tzedakah box, because we can't predict the reaction of a future recipient.

I disagree with the Rashba on this point. I have always found that taking the time to recite a b'rachah, pausing for those few moments, is one of the most concrete ways we have to infuse meaning into an action. This is particularly true of actions that we do without much thought, such as throwing money in a pushke at the local restaurant or placing a bracelet on your arm. Actions like these can become automatic. When we stop and reflect on what we are doing, when we visualize the good works that money in the pushke potentially brings or how that bracelet can promote someone else's awareness of a cause, these are the moments when we successfully open our hands as well as our hearts.

Lori Sagarin, RJE, is director of congregational learning at Temple Beth Israel, Skokie, Illinois.

CHOOSE TO LIVE LIFE AS A BLESSING

Robin L. Eisenberg

In this week's parashah, Re'eh, Moses presents the Jewish people with an important choice. He poses a question without a question mark: "See, this day I set before you blessing and curse." (Deut. 11:26) Although Moses implies that there is a choice to be made, he urges the Israelites to follow God's commandments. There are a number of messages in this one parashah. Rabbi Larry Hoffman in a commentary on this portion in *The Jewish Week* points out that God is speaking to each of us individually. Therefore, all of us need to address these issues, and we must address them on a regular basis. Think for a moment about the word see. Do we open our eyes and "see" the choices before us as an opportunity to make a difference in the world? Or do we open our eyes but not recognize what the choices are? Or do we recognize the choices but not put a lot of time or energy into making a choice? Or do some of us open our eyes and "see" the choices but ignore them, choosing to take the easy way out or do what fits best in our lives?

How many of us ever see the choice as an opportunity to seize the moment, to make each day a blessing? On the other hand, how many of us see the choices that are put before us each day as a problem—another decision that needs to be made in a day already overcrowded with things to do and people to see?

The value of individual freedom to choose versus making choices for the good of the group was an issue the Israelites may have faced and definitely face today. The two are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and rather we need to be constantly aware of both. To follow the commandments and live a life of blessing helps us continue to be an am segulah, a treasured people. By being designated an am segulah the Israelites had a responsibility to carry out the commandments. How do we carry out this responsibility today? As Reform Jews, we have a special responsibility to make the most of each day and each experience.

This portion introduces the month of Elul. During this time we prepare ourselves for the High Holy Days. It makes sense, then, to use the questions posed here to look at our lives—how we approach the opportunities presented to us to observe and celebrate and choose as the Israelites did—to choose to be a blessing to ourselves, our community, and the larger world.

Robin L. Eisenberg, RJE, is Director of Education and Youth at Temple Beth El of Boca Raton, Florida. She is a past president of NATE and the incoming chair of the Commission on Jewish Education.

LESS IS MORE . . . MORE IS LESS?

Laura Novak Winer

It is quite rare that the Torah repeats itself. When we do find repetition in Torah, we know that the message being given is an important one. In Parashat R'eih, we have such an example. Deuteronomy 13:1 is a repetition of an admonition given just prior in Deuteronomy 4:2, "Be careful to observe only that which I enjoin upon you: neither add to it nor take away from it." The Torah's commandments are set—they are not to be altered in any way, by either adding to or subtracting from them.

Rashi uncovers this principle much earlier in the Torah. In Genesis 3, we read about the conversation between the serpent and Eve. The serpent asks Eve if God had commanded her not to eat from any of the trees in the garden. Eve responds, saying, "It is only about the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden that God said: 'You shall not eat of it or touch it, lest you die'" (Genesis 3:3). Eve's response is actually inaccurate. The command that God gave to Adam earlier, in Genesis 2:16-17 is, "Of every tree of the garden you are free to eat; but as for the tree of knowledge of good and bad, you must not eat of it; for as soon as you eat of it, you shall die." In her response to the serpent, Eve embellishes the command by saying "you shall not eat of it or touch it. . . ." The original admonition only prohibited against eating of the tree. There was no prohibition against touching it. In his commentary to Genesis 3:3, Rashi warns us that Eve's embellishment, though innocent in intent, is inappropriate. Rashi comments that if one is tempted to add to a command, one may actually take away from performance of that command in the end.

When we reach the Book of Deuteronomy at the end of the Torah, we find this principle illuminated again — not just once, but twice. But why repeat it in Deuteronomy? Surely the point was made sufficiently in Genesis. Yet, when we look closely at this concept of not adding to or subtracting from the commands of the Torah in its context in Parashat R'eih, we come to an even deeper understanding of the principle.

To understand this principle in a more profound way we must look at the verse in relation to its placement in the text of R'eih as a whole. While our version of numbering chapters and verses demarks this focal verse as Deuteronomy 13:1, at the beginning of a chapter, many commentators consider this verse linked to chapter 12. The verse then serves as a summation to the discussion in chapter 12, which instructs the Israelites to create central places of worship and destroy the places and practices of idolatry.

What follows Deuteronomy 13:1 is a seemingly disparate list of other rules, warnings, and instructions for the

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Israelites as they begin establish their community in the Land of Israel. These commands include how to recognize and avoid false prophets, details of the laws of kashrut, instructions for tithing, guiding principles for the establishment a system of social equity around debts, and guidelines for the observance of the Shalosh R'galim, the Three Pilgrimage Festivals: Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot.

Another way of understanding the placement of Deuteronomy 13:1 is to see it as a link between the first part of the parashah (Deuteronomy 11:26-12:31) and second part (Deuteronomy 13:2-16:17). In viewing the verse as a link between the two parts of the parashah, we come to a new understanding of R'eih as a whole and of the principle at its center.

In Pirkei Avot 1:2 we learn, "The world is sustained by three things: by Torah, by avodah [worship], and by g'milut chasadim [acts of loving-kindness]." When we look at all of the disparate topics in R'eih, we see that we are being instructed how to observe these three pillars of Jewish life. We find the pillar of Torah in the commands about belief in one God and the prohibitions against idolatry or inappropriate sacrifices; we find the pillar of avodah in the commands about centralizing worship, observance of the Shalosh R'galim, and kashrut; and we find the pillar of g'milut chasadim in the commands regarding the ethical treatment of others. R'eih paints a picture of Jewish observance that is balanced on this tripod of Torah, avodah, and g'milut chasadim.

Now, when we look to the pivotal verse, 13:1, at the center of this discussion, we see it in a different light. "Be careful to observe only that which I enjoin upon you: neither add to it nor take away from it." These commandments represent the roundedness of Jewish life and observance, as God has envisioned it. God's instructions for us have a sense of purpose and balance from their inception. To add to or detract from any of these commands would impair this equilibrium and throw everything off balance.

Rabbi Laura Novak Winer, R.J.E., is the Regional Director of Youth and Informal Education for the Pacific Central West Council of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, San Francisco, California.

TEARING DOWN BY BUILDING UP

Ann Rubin Goldman

Few commentators have been brave enough to address a certain passage in Parashat Re'eh. I can sympathize with them. My first reaction to the passage was less than positive. Deuteronomy 12:2-3 records God commanding: "You must destroy all the sites at which the nations you are to dispossess worshiped their gods, whether on lofty mountains or on hills or under any luxuriant tree. Tear down their altars, smash their pillars, put their sacred posts to the fire, and cut down the images of their gods, obliterating their name from that site."

At one time, this teaching was essential because it discouraged idol worship among our people. Today, it strikes us as distasteful and anachronistic. The last thing we need or want to do is to destroy our non-Jewish neighbors' places of worship!

The rabbis who dare to comment on this passage also approach it with caution. They do not want to incite anti-Jewish sentiment. Writing in the second century C.E., Rabbi Ishmael says that the passage does not mean you should destroy other nations' worship sites. Instead, he maintains, it should be thought of as a warning not to do in your sanctuary what idol worshipers do in theirs, lest your sanctuary be destroyed.

Rashi, writing in the eleventh century, is bolder. He states that "obliterating their name from that site" means that it is permissible to "call the sites nicknames of reproach." But he refrains from any suggestion of doing physical damage to such sites.

In his commentary *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs* (Soncino Press, 1936), Dr. J. H. Hertz is as bold as he is modern. He says that the words "you must destroy" mean "utterly destroy." But then he moderates his tone. Quoting Sifrei (fourth century C.E.) regarding the phrase "from that site," Hertz writes: "The injunction to destroy idolatrous places refers only to those in the Holy Land, not outside." He clearly wants to limit the collateral damage.

Taking into account the apprehension about this passage, why should we not just ignore it and move on? Hertz offers the reason in a brilliant interpretation of one of the passages' key phrases. He asks: "How do you obliterate their name?" He then answers: "The very memory of the local Baals will cease by our ignoring them." How clever! He solves our problem by equating "obliterating" with purposely ignoring. Ignore the foreign gods or intrusions in life, he says, and that will automatically force you to focus on something meaningful instead. Tear down by building up. Make Judaism so appealing that alternatives pale in comparison. What an ingenious way of affirming a biblical dictum by

turning it on its head! What a creative way of turning a negative into a positive!

So what does this passage say to us today? It says:

- Worry less about missionaries and more about meaningful Shabbat observance.
- Worry less about Christmas trees and more about fully celebrating the Jewish holidays throughout the year.
- Worry less about whom our children will marry and more about leading a life that will give them reasons to marry within Judaism.
- Worry less about what our neighbors are doing and more about what we should be doing.
- Worry less about success and financial gain and more about the riches that accrue from the study of Torah and the doing of mitzvot.

Might the above be what God intended in the first place?

Ann Rubin Goldman is the educator at Congregation Scharai Zedek in Tampa, FL.

Kashrut: You Are What You Eat

David Forman

"There can be no joy without food and drink." (Talmud, Mo-eid Katan 20a) "Only in meat is there joy." (Talmud, P'sachim 109a) "The best of milk dishes is a slice of beef." (Shalom Aleichem) This is my type of Judaism. Too bad that we are forewarned against taking advantage of the above talmudic instructions by Proverbs 23:21, which states, "Guzzlers and gluttons will be impoverished."

The notion of what one should eat, how one should eat, when one should eat, and where one should eat occupies virtually volumes of Jewish literature. For a Jew, "You are what you eat" - except when you forget you're a Jew, as the following joke makes clear.

A Jewish student at a university in Boston approached his Hillel rabbi, confessing that he had "sinned."

Student: Rabbi, I ate a pork sandwich on Yom Kippur.

Rabbi: Don't you know that it is forbidden to eat on Yom Kippur?

Student: I know. It slipped my mind.

Rabbi: Don't you know that pork is not kosher?

Student: I know. I didn't remember.

Rabbi: Then why did you do it?

Student: I forgot that I was Jewish!

There are many ways to remember that we are Jewish, but according to Judaism, one of the most compelling is to watch what we eat. Like our language, our prayers, and our clothes, food links us to our Jewish past and to Jews around the world. And I am not talking about gefilte fish, borscht, or chicken soup.

One of the greatest misconceptions in Judaism is that kashrut-dietary laws-was instituted for health reasons. The primary reason that a Jew is commanded to keep kosher is based on the biblical verse found in this week's parashah, R'eih: "For you are a people consecrated to Adonai, your God; your God chose you from among all other peoples on earth to be His treasured people. You shall not eat anything abhorrent." (Deuteronomy 14:2-3)

Like so many aspects of Jewish life, the concept of kashrut is introduced as a way to elevate the Jew, to bring one "up" in his or her everyday life toward holiness. Holiness in Hebrew means to set oneself apart. Maimonides maintained that keeping the dietary laws "trains us to master our appetites; to accustom us to restrain our desires; and not to consider the pleasure of eating and drinking the end of man's existence." (Guide for the Perplexed, 3:35) In interpreting the biblical dictates relating to kashrut, the early rabbis believed that the secret of Jewish survival was this maintenance of separatism (holiness).

Parashat R'eih touches on many subjects, the most significant of which deals with the laws of holiness. And this holiness code, as it were, begins with the laws of kashrut. The parashah continues with a detailed accounting of specific permissible and impermissible foods. What is interesting to note is that this litany of what one is and is not to eat is immediately followed by a moral accounting of one's eating habits: The parashah speaks of tithes-setting aside a portion of one's produce for the less fortunate, symbolically symbolized by the Levite, "for he has no hereditary portion as you have." (Deuteronomy 14:27)

Throughout the generations, the laws of kashrut have been expanded, interpreted, and maintained, often assuming added meaning because of the sociological turmoil of a particular time frame in which the Jews lived. It was reasoned that if Jews had a separate code for eating, then they would be prevented from dining with their non-Jewish neighbors, thereby not socializing with them and thus reducing the chances of intermarriage and helping to guarantee the survival of the Jewish people. This view is perhaps best illustrated-and contradicted-by the story of a sixth-grade student in a Sunday school class. When asked about inter-dating, the student responded, "I could never go out with a Muslim because Muslims don't eat pork!"

Given the harsh reality that Jewish life in North America is undergoing massive assimilation, a Jew does need to ask himself or herself, What are the minimum standards of Jewish practice required to hold onto one's Judaism?

While there are hygienic and humanitarian reasons that would justify one's maintaining the laws of kashrut, the intention here is to illustrate that the basic motivation for keeping kashrut is to help a Jew remember that he or she is Jewish, a separate and holy part of a holy people.

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"A physician restricts the diet of only those patients whom he expects to recover. So God prescribed the dietary laws for those who have hope of a future life. Others may eat anything." (Tanchum b. Hanilai, Leviticus Rabbah, 13:2) By maintaining a respect for kashrut and incorporating some, if not all, of the rules governing a kosher home into our life, we have a good chance of holding on to our Judaism and contributing to the perpetuation of the Jewish people.

David Forman is the director of the Israel office of the UAHC in Jerusalem. He is the founder of Rabbis for Human Rights, which has received the Knesset Peace Prize.

FOOD AND REMEMBRANCE

Susan B. Stone

When I was growing up in Brooklyn, most families I knew had kosher kitchens. As a result, most of them had five sets of dishes: two for milk and meat on Pesach and two for the rest of the year. The fifth set? For Chinese food, of course. While such scrupulous attention to detail would not pass muster in many parts of the Jewish world, it has always held a certain logic for me.

The Jewish logic about food and the discipline about what we eat is, for me, about remembering: Jell-o at the end of a meal always reminds me of my grandmother. With five sets of dishes, we remember both the Torah injunctions and the fact that we are free in America to live our religious lives. Of course, this description is tongue-in-cheek, but not completely. The remembering part is important. In Parashat R'eih there are at least five connections between food and remembering. In Deuteronomy 14 we are given a long list of animals and the standards by which to judge whether or not they are potentially kosher food. Verse 2 begins: "For you are a people consecrated to Adonai your God: Adonai your God chose you from among all other peoples on earth." In other words, Remember who you are.

In Deuteronomy 14:23 we are instructed to eat the tithes of our new grain and wine and oil and the firstlings of our herds and flocks in God's Presence. Why? So that we may learn to revere God and to remember all the good done for us that has brought us such a bountiful harvest.

We are also repeatedly enjoined not to forget the Levites in our midst-to make sure that they are provided for and given a proper income. Their special position, their connection both to Aaron and to the sanctuary in Jerusalem, is highlighted for us so that we will remember all who may be in need and remember, again, the blessings of God.

The Pesach proscriptions are the most obvious examples of eating in order to remember. (Deuteronomy 16:1-8) But let us not forget that the counting of weeks from Pesach to

Shavuot is tied to the sheaves of barley and that we are to "bear in mind that [we] were slaves in Egypt and take care to obey these laws." (Deuteronomy 16:12) Again and again, remembering. All this admonition to remember is not because we are lazy or forgetful. No, Torah's call to remember has a positive force behind it. In Torah, remembering is meant to spur us on to ethical action. We remember enslavement and liberation so that we may work to eradicate them from the earth. We remember the poor so that "there shall be no needy among you, ... if only you heed Adonai your God and take care to keep all this Instruction that I enjoin upon you this day." (Deuteronomy 15:4-5)

Of late, there has been a renewed emphasis on Jewish dietary discipline as an expression of this commitment to remembering. Going by the name eco-kashrut, it challenges us to ask whether veal, no matter how it is kashered (made kosher), can ever truly be kosher since it is produced at the expense of an animal's suffering. Can fruits and vegetables that have been drenched in pesticides be truly kosher? Are grapes or lettuce picked by underpaid and exploited migrant farm workers kosher? Mindfulness of what we eat inevitably brings us back to the reason that we Jews care about food at all: The act of eating, when sanctified, reminds us that we are Jews, and the blessings God has showered upon us impel us to act with godly intention in all we do.

Rabbi Susan B. Stone is the spiritual leader of Temple Beth Shalom in Hudson, OH.

SEEING IS BELIEVING

Stephen Karol

Because I am primarily a "visual learner," I am attracted to the first word of this portion, R'eih. I remember someone's phone number better if I have visualized it on a list; I read from the Torah better if I can picture the vowels that were in the Tikkun; and I recall experiences better if I can replay them in my head as if they were on a VCR in my brain. It seems to me that our ancestors who went out of Egypt were also visual learners. They had lived in a country that was a "feast for the eyes" (although they weren't able to partake of that feast), and this image stayed in their memories. Consider that they had seen big buildings everywhere, that the Egyptians had looked different than they did, that the Ten Plagues had been incredible sights, and that the successful crossing of the Sea of Reeds and the drowning of the Egyptians came under the category of "I wouldn't believe it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes!"

Yet the use of the word "see" at the beginning of Parashat R'eih is about something other than the physical act of seeing. Of the more than four hundred times in which the verb "see" is used in the Tanach, this is one of the few times in which it has special significance. Others include

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the following: In Genesis 27, Isaac, whose "eyes were too dim to see" (27:1), smells the clothes that he thinks are Esau's and says, "R'eih, the smell of my son is like the smell of the fields that Adonai has blessed" (27:27). In Genesis 41:41, Pharaoh says to Joseph, "R'eih, I put you in charge of all the land of Egypt" after Joseph has proposed his plan to save Egypt from famine. When Moses has doubts about whether Pharaoh is listening to him, God replies: "R'eih, I place you in the role of God to Pharaoh" (Exodus 7:1). After the people bring their freewill offerings for the Tabernacle, Moses introduces the man in charge by saying, "R'u [plural of r'eih], Adonai has singled out by name Bezalel..." (Exodus 35:30). And in a phrase strikingly similar to the one at the beginning of Parashat R'eih, we read about clear-cut choices again in Deuteronomy 30:15: "R'eih, I set before you this day life and prosperity, death and adversity."

In each of the examples above, the speaker is announcing something that will have an impact on the future. We often use the imperative form when we want to get people's attention. For example, when we are trying to make an important point, we say, "Look, this is what I want you to understand" or "Do you see what I mean?" The word r'eih is a way of drawing attention to what is happening or is about to happen, focusing on its importance, and recognizing that the future will be different based on the choice that is about to be made. Whether or not you can see the blessings or the curses in front of you, you have to believe that you can, and then you have to believe that God has given you the ability to do what is right as an individual and as a member of the Jewish community.

Stephen Karol is the rabbi of Temple Isaiah, Stony Brook, NY.