

From the Rabbi's Desk

November 2020

Friends,

The nights are getting longer. The air is chilling, and the leaves are falling. Likely soon, we will be indoors much more of the time. The pandemic is still upon us with no end in sight. This is the quiet time on the Jewish calendar. We are in that long period between the end of the fall festivals and Chanukah. But there is still much to celebrate, and I'd like to take the time to tell you three things I'm thinking about.

First, I want to take a few lines to tell you about a great accomplishment. Just recently, Rabbi Polly Berg was elevated to a full-time chaplain at the VA Medical Center in West Haven. Many of you know Rabbi Berg has been working at the VA part-time for the past few years. It is rare for a civilian Jewish chaplain to be elevated. She is now only one of two full-time Jewish women chaplains in the entire VA system. In her work, she is responsible for all veterans' spiritual care, not just Jewish veterans. Her elevation demonstrates that she is a vital presence for our veterans and has earned her colleagues' respect at the VA and the Jewish Welfare Board. When we think of rabbis, many of us automatically think of congregations or scholarship. We must think more broadly. Rabbi Berg clearly demonstrates that we should be equally thinking of our chaplains. I am so proud of Polly.

Second, November First Friday is almost here. We are re-starting our First Friday programs. Obviously, we won't have Shabbat dinner together, but we have beautiful programs planned. This year, First Fridays will begin at 6:45 pm with Tot-Shabbat. This will be a story and song program directed primarily for families with children from birth to 2nd grade. This will be followed by a Family Kabbalat Shabbat service beginning around 7:00 pm, using the siddur, Mishkan T'fillah for Youth. We have been using this siddur in the religious school for the past two years. Our Religious School directors, Armi Rowe and Jennifer Zettler will distribute our siddurim to families for their home use until we can be together in the synagogue again. Our regular Erev Shabbat service will follow at the usual time of 7:30 pm. One Zoom link will get you into all three services, or join on YouTube Live. **I urge families to participate. Our children learn our traditions and values best by living them *with us*.** Our November First Friday will be even more special. For this first Tot-Shabbat, we will celebrate the consecration of our youngest new learners, Morgan Hicks and Gwenyth Arruda. Come celebrate with us.

Third, I want to let you know that we will have a unique service the Friday after Thanksgiving, November 27th. Before the pandemic, we commissioned Rabbi Or Zohar to compose music for the *Hoda'ah*, prayer of the Amidah. This is the thanksgiving prayer. It begins with the words, *modim anachnu lach*, we give thanks to You. Thankfulness is central to Judaism. The Psalmist says, "It is good to give thanks to Adonai, to sing hymns to Your name, O Most High" (Psalm 92). "Enter God's gates with thanksgiving, God's courts with praise" (Psalm 100).

The first prayer each day begins, "*modeh ani lifanecha*, I give thanks to You," for our very existence, breath, and heartbeat are a gift from the Source of Life. Moses enjoins the Israelites to give thanks after they have eaten their fill, built fine houses, and gathered their wealth. He warns them to not be haughty by saying, "my own power and my own hand made this wealth for me." Moses reminds them of the Covenant with their ancestors and that it is God who gave them the power to do all things by bringing them out of Egypt. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has noted in his weekly Torah study that several modern scientific studies have shown that a sense of gratitude improves psychological health and increases longevity (see R' Sacks on Ekev, 5775). For all these reasons and more, I believe it is vital for us to elevate thankfulness in our worship. On November 27th, Sherry and I will debut this song for you. Some of the criteria we gave to Or was that it should be singable, repetitive, and have a niggun aspect that invites everyone to participate. The night after our national Thanksgiving feast, we will teach you our new Jewish way to give thanks each Shabbat. Join us – for even in these dark times, we have much to be thankful for.

Rabbi Marc