

# SHORESH

שורש

**Congregation Etz Chayim  
Community News**

JANUARY 2022

שבט תשפ"ב | SHEVAT 5782

**Purims Past**

**Synagogue Relevance**

**Beautifying Mitzvot**



Congregation | עין חיים  
**Etz Chayim**  
FINDING MEANING IN JEWISH LIFE



# Where Is G-d in the Purim Story?

by Rabbi Kliel Rose

The holiday of Purim is fascinating. The origin story of this holiday is *Megillat Esther*, the Book of Esther. For some reason, G-d is not mentioned once in the *Megillah*. Before we delve into this deeply theological matter, it is helpful to comprehend the significance of the Book of Esther.

While we have many scrolls in Judaism (Ruth, Lamentations, and others), Jews often refer to The Book of Esther as “The *Megillah*.” On Purim, the *mitzvah* (commandment) most widely known and followed is the requirement to read or listen to *Megillat Esther*. The Book of Esther is often chanted using a special *trope* (cantillation modality) or melody, which sounds very different from the chanting of Torah or *Haftarah*. It is preferable to read The *Megillah* from a scroll, but if one is not available then it is permitted to read it from a book.

Traditionally, only a trained *sofer* or *soferet* (scribe) can write a Scroll of Esther. This labour-intensive process involves learning the art of ancient Hebrew calligraphy, which is how a Torah scroll, *mezuzah*, and the small parchments in *t’fillin* boxes are written. According to Rachel Jackson, a professional *soferet*, “A single *Megillah* contains 16 columns of 21 lines, each with a total of 12,111 letters. This takes close to 100 hours of holding a quill and shaping each letter (not to mention hours spent reviewing the *halakha* [Jewish law relating to how the text should be scribed], cutting quills, sewing the sheets of parchment together, and carefully checking for mistakes). Out of a sea of straight lines and curves emerges a beautiful narrative consisting of 12,111 characters, each with something to say.”<sup>1</sup>

As mentioned, the Scroll of Esther does not contain the name of G-d. Why is that the case? To uncover this mysterious issue, it is necessary to recognize that the Book of Esther is quite enigmatic in its literary style. There is really nothing about the narrative that is simple. As one scholar shares: “Even though the ‘good’ Jews are clear winners over ‘evil’ Haman, deeper engagement



*Megillat Esther* Italy 1616, The Education Center of the National Library of Israel (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/deed.en>)

with this narrative actually inspires the much more complex and profound theological question of whether blind fate or the hidden hand of G-d holds humanity in its sway”<sup>2</sup>.

To arrive at a possible answer to our theological query, recall that the name of our holiday is *Purim*; this comes from the Hebrew plural form of *pur*, meaning lot. When Haman determines the date to murder the Jews of Persia, the “luck of the draw” seemingly wins over and G-d is noticeably absent.

Looking more piercingly at The *Megillah*, a *Midrashic* interpretation of its heroine’s name “Esther” recollects the divine vow “*haster astir panai*,” or “I [G-d] surely will hide My face.” There is additional support in the form of a proof-text from The *Megillah*, where Mordechai makes reference to help coming “from another place.” It is this, according to a long-held opinion within Jewish tradition, which is interpreted as an implicit allusion to G-d.

An insight I came across might lead us to arrive at one answer to our problematic question (Why is G-d absent from the *Megillah*?):

A comparison with the Exodus from Egypt—commemorated just a few weeks later at Passover—produces striking parallels and very different conclusions. In both stories, a hateful tyrant threatens to destroy the Jews. While the stateless Israelite slaves flee Egypt to find freedom under G-d’s protecting care, the established Jews of Persia use their political connections

and skill to reassert themselves within their host community. If the triumph of the Israelites in Egypt is explicitly determined by the exercise of divine authority, the story of Purim is characterized by human deception, sexual manipulation, and bloodshed. In simple terms, the theology of Passover celebrates G-d’s determination to lead the Jews from exile to their own land, while Purim reflects the situation of a people in the Diaspora surviving by their own wiles within a world of moral uncertainty.<sup>2</sup>

It is possible that Purim, as the holiday which highlights human agency (not necessarily the opposite of direct Divine intervention, as is the case in the Passover story), serves as an indicator of G-d’s implicit presence. Candidly stated, maybe it is the ability of Mordechai and Esther to utilize their own moral convictions. Add to this their very unambiguous insistence on speaking out against the intentional genocide of their people—calling out this very injustice to the highest authority of Persia (the king) becomes the way in which G-d’s apparent obscurity in this story (and in our own world) is revealed. ■

<sup>1</sup>“Scribes in a Circumscribed World: From Esther to Me,” *My Jewish Learning*: <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/2016/02/23/scribes-in-a-circumscribed-world-from-esther-to-me/>.

<sup>2</sup>“Purim Themes and Theology,” *My Jewish Learning*: <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/purim-themes-and-theology/>

# Infusing Intention into Mitzvot

## Beautifying G-d's Commandments

**W**e have a choice as we carry out each of the *mitzvot* that G-d commanded of Jews. We can complete the *mitzvah* mechanically, using only the fewest brain cells required to perform the commandment in its most pared-down state. Or we can fulfill the *mitzvah* with intention, care, enthusiasm, and contemplation about what we are doing, how we are doing it, and why.

*Hiddur mitzvah* means beautification of a *mitzvah*. The term generally refers to the physical beauty of a ritual object—the ornamental embroidery adorning a Torah mantle, the colourful illumination found in *Megillat Esther*, which we read on Purim, an artist-crafted Seder plate. But *hiddur mitzvah* also involves appealing to senses other than sight, such as musical decoration in a cantor's cantillation, or pleasing aromas and flavours which heighten our enjoyment of a festival feast. *Hiddur mitzvah* is elevating a *mitzvah* from the basic *halakhic* (Jewish law) requirements for the commandment to infuse richness and human enjoyment into the religious act.

It is commonly understood that the concept of *hiddur mitzvah* stems from a Rabbi Ishmael *Midrash* commentary on a verse from Exodus (*Shemot*) 15:2: "This is my G-d and I will glorify Him." Rabbi Ishmael asked: "Is it possible for a human being to add glory to his Creator? What this really means is: I shall glorify Him in the way I perform *mitzvot*. I shall prepare before Him a beautiful *lulav*, a beautiful *sukkah*, beautiful *tzitzit*, and beautiful *t'fillin*" (*Midrash Mechilta, Shirata*).

But if we focus on the beauty of a ritual object when fulfilling G-d's commandments, are we not missing the point—the meaning



Ornate sterling silver Chanukiah.

behind the act? The answer might lie in an understanding of beauty as the means, not the end.

"It is more about thinking intentionally about the object one chooses to use for the *mitzvah*," says Cantor Tracy Kasner. "What is beautiful or special to me may not be beautiful or special to you. The object is material, of course, but necessary to complete the *mitzvah*. Paying attention to the object helps us pay attention to the action when using it. I think this encourages awareness rather than materialism."

To illustrate, she describes her Shabbat *kiddush* cup. "I use the ugliest *kiddush* cup I have for Shabbat—it is tarnished, and old, and I can't fix it. I use it because it is nostalgic for me, and it has nothing to do with beauty. Using it makes me intentionally think about the act of the *mitzvah*. This is what makes it *Hiddur* for me," she says. ■

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# Meeting Members Where They Are

**To stay relevant, Congregation Etz Chayim must keep up with members' evolving needs and continue to build up its "face" within the wider Winnipeg Jewish community.**

"The only constant is change." –  
Heraclitus, 500 BCE

"**relevant** (adjective) appropriate to the current time, period, or circumstances; of contemporary interest." –Oxford Languages

**W**ith an ever-increasing array of work, activities, obligations, and media competing for our attention and commitment, it's no wonder synagogues struggle to be relevant. Relevance was Marvin Samphir's primary focus when he was president for Congregation Etz Chayim (2014 to 2018. See Scales of Justice, page 8). "The biggest challenge the synagogue continues to face is to be relevant, where people want to be part of what it can offer," he says. "Not an easy task given the competition for our time, some attitudes towards faith-based organizations, and an aging congregation."

During his tenure as president, Marvin says the board undertook thorough introspection of Etz Chayim, with an intent to clarify the shul's identity, core values and mission, and also to set goals for the future of the synagogue. "We were looking at what we are and who we should be," he says.

In 2017 the board also spent time learning about the people of Congregation Etz Chayim, eventually coming up with a strategic plan that was both responsive to the needs of the community and would promote sustainability into the future. In other words, a blueprint for staying relevant in its congregation's lives.

## Welcoming Presence

For a synagogue, relevance begins when a person passes through the main entrance, says Marvin. In the past, "when you walked through the front doors, there was no one there to greet you. The table was in the wrong place. There were no flowers, no real



warmth," he says. "If you were someone who came on a regular basis, perhaps it didn't matter. But if you were someone new, you would say, 'they don't really want me here.'"

"That was one of the things I wanted to change," Marvin says. Today, greeters welcome *shul-goers* arriving for services at the door, and the foyer layout is more approachable.

The strategic plan resulted in several other changes for the synagogue: Etz Chayim's website was revitalized. The *shul* initiated weekly email communication with members. *Shoresh*, this triannual community news magazine, was created to share stories about people of Congregation Etz Chayim, to report on evolving *shul* programs and services, and as a platform for discussing issues of relevance for members and the wider Jewish community.

"We had to up our game," Marvin says, referring both to "how we see ourselves and how the community sees us. One of the keys is communication and making all congregants feel welcomed and an integral part of the 'family'." Equally important is perception of the *shul* outside the "family," he continues. "We need a face in the community. Without a face, making efforts to publicize what we do, it will continue to hamper our

efforts to stabilize the strength and encourage growth of the congregation."

Other changes emanating from the strategic plan included the Our Trees of Life initiative, established to foster intergenerational family dialogue; through this program, Etz Chayim families can generate digital recordings of their unique lineage stories. Partnerships with some community organizations were also improved; membership policies were changed to include dual-faith families; the option for offsite *B'nai Mitzvah* was established; and music was introduced at some Shabbat events. All adaptations to *shul* offerings and operations were based on new understandings Etz Chayim had gained about the evolving needs and priorities of the community and were designed to meet members right where they were—to stay relevant.

## The Right Rabbi

These changes were promptly put to the test when Etz Chayim was dealt two significant blows. The first: the synagogue found itself without a rabbi.

"We were very fortunate," Marvin says. "Cantor Tracy really kept things going. Tracy became our 'face' and held us together spiritually."

But a large synagogue community requires a rabbi no matter how capable



the cantor. A committee was struck to oversee the search and help define what Congregation Etz Chayim needed in a new rabbi.

"You have to be able to put yourself out there (as a rabbi), take a few chances, a change in attitude and direction," Marvin says, summarizing what the board and the committee felt the congregation needed at the time.

The call went out to the rabbinic community. And a year later, Rabbi Kliel (and his family) joined the Etz Chayim fold. "Kliel appeared to be what the synagogue needed—a more 'today' person who could reach out and be the catalyst for change and improving the face of the congregation—and it certainly has born out," says Marvin.

## Cyber-Relevance

The second challenge for Congregation Etz Chayim rocked the entire world—the Covid pandemic. The *shul* was forced to cancel in-person services. B'nai Mitzvah had to be postponed. Life as we know it ground to a halt as we all moved into lockdown.

And Congregation Etz Chayim quickly discovered that to remain relevant, it had to establish a more prominent and interactive virtual existence. So again, the *shul* adjusted. Once it had installed sophisticated technology to anchor an updated cyber-branch of the synagogue via its existing website, *shul* services, programming, and *B'nai Mitzvah* moved online, and livestreaming funerals became an option. *Beit Chayim*, an online Jewish life and learning centre, was established to keep the community engaged and enlightened with live, interactive classes and workshops. As well, the Branching Out program was created so Etz Chayim could stay connected with the community's most vulnerable members and offer them support where needed.

"And we're still here," Marvin says. "The fact that Etz Chayim still operates is testament that some things have been done right." When the pandemic finally stabilized, Congregation Etz Chayim was ready to welcome its community at the front door, again.

Marvin hopes to see the synagogue become even more actively involved in members' daily lives. "We have to do more to be relevant. We can't just be a *shul* that is there for life-cycle events," he says. He wonders if Congregation Etz Chayim could one day partner with Jewish Child and Family Service. And he would like to see the *shul* as a place for seniors to gather on a social level, as well as a spiritual education hub for children who don't receive Jewish education at school.

To reassess the needs and desires of the Etz Chayim community once pandemic restrictions had lifted, the synagogue sent out a programming and education survey to members. Etz Chayim will draw on survey results to help determine future programming.

"Keeping people (coming to synagogue) is a difficult business," Marvin acknowledges. It means frequent re-evaluation of the *shul's* identity and commitment to reinventing itself as often as necessary to retain value and relevance in members' lives. Because evolution is a certainty; the only constant is change. ■

## Best of Three



Photos: Robyn Shapiro (robynshapirophotography.com)

B'nai Mitzvah students work long and hard to learn their Torah *parasha*, their *Haftarah*, and all related blessings and prayers. Multiply that by a factor of three for Dylan Weinstein. When Dylan finally chanted *Sh'lach L'cha*, his Torah *parasha* for his June 5, 2021 Bar Mitzvah, it was actually the third Torah portion he had learned; his Bar Mitzvah had already been postponed twice, from an original May 2020 date and then again from the rescheduled October 2020 date.

"There was a sense of relief that it did actually happen and he could have that experience," says Dylan's mom, Brenlee Schacter, after Dylan's *simcha*.

Dylan's Bar Mitzvah was at Congregation Etz Chayim, where he was surrounded by his immediate family: Mom, Dad Josh Weinstein, and sister Samantha, as well as both sets of grandparents, one uncle, and one aunt. All other family members and friends attended his Bar Mitzvah via Zoom.

"That was a bonus," Brenlee says. "There are people for whom it may have been too far (to travel). Because of Zoom, they were able to watch and participate, so that was nice."

Relatives who were with Dylan at Etz Chayim were honoured with *Aliyot*; relatives who could not be there contributed via Zoom (including the singing of *Adon Olam* and recitation of the Prayer for the State of Israel).

While the affair was not at all what the family had originally planned, Brenlee says her son was happy with the experience. "He felt that it was a special event and felt lucky that it could go ahead."

"In the end, he enjoyed the fact that it was small and intimate," she continues. And they were all grateful that they could be inside the synagogue for the occasion. "He had friends that couldn't even do that," acknowledges Brenlee.

To celebrate afterwards, the family had a *kiddush* at home, catered by Congregation Etz Chayim. Dylan's grandparents and Winnipeg aunts, uncles, and cousins also enjoyed the Etz-Chayim-catered *kiddush* in their respective homes, and the family came together again via Zoom.

"A lot of people dropped by the house during the course of the weekend to wish him well," Brenlee adds, noting that all visitors remained outside and socially distanced.

In addition to the three *parashot* and *Haftarot*, Dylan's Bar Mitzvah journey included lessons in flexibility, patience, and rolling with the punches. And Brenlee says her son matured a lot, over the course of the experience.

"It wasn't what any of us had anticipated and it would have been nice to have had other people there. But it was wonderful, we all enjoyed it, and he did a great job," she says, adding, "I knew he would, regardless of what it was." ■



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## Memories of Purims Past

**W**e Jews love our Purim. Who doesn't appreciate a good reason to make noise, dress in costume, throw a party, and eat and drink to excess? Purim is an annual, mid-Adar festival (beginning at sunset March 16 of this year) which celebrates our salvation from persecution in ancient Persia at the hands of the evil Haman.

We find the full story of Purim when we roll open *Megillat* Esther, the scroll of Esther: Haman, the Jew-hating prime minister to King Ahasuerus, drew lots to determine the day he would annihilate the Jews (Purim means "lots" in ancient Persian). But Queen Esther, a Jew, and her cousin Mordechai foiled Haman, leading the Jews to defeat the enemy and re-establishing peace in Persia. A topic still sadly relevant today, the message of hope underlying the story is one reason for Jews' fondness of Purim.

We perform four *mitzvot* (commandments) on Purim: we read from The *Megillah* to tell the Purim story (making noise to blot out Haman's name each time it is said); we eat a festive meal—a *se'udah*; we give to the needy (*matanot laEvyonim*); and we send food gifts to family and friends (*mishloach manot*). We also make and share *hamantashen*, yummy three-cornered Purim pastries packed with poppyseed, dried fruit, and other tasty fillings and shaped to remind us of Haman's three-cornered hat.

Purim looked different last year—like everything else. But we adapted, found ways to make it festive. On *erev* Purim, Congregation Etz Chayim led a virtual, interactive *Megillah* learning session followed by a gangbuster glow-in-the-dark dance party planned and organized by the Children and Family programming committee and led by Barry Kay (Cherry Tree Productions). All participants received *mishloach manot* packages filled with *hamantashen*, *graggers* (noisemakers), activity kits, and glowsticks. On Purim morning, the *shul* hosted a virtual *Megillah*-reading service (The *Megillah* was read by Hadass Eviatar).

Here, Congregation Etz Chayim members reflect on how they honoured Purim last year and muse about Purims past.

**Hadass Eviatar:** I was privileged to read The *Megillah* online for the Zoom *minyan*, and we delivered (and gratefully received) *mishloach manot*.

**Melanie Richters:** We had a Zoom dinner with my family in Ottawa (for our *se'udah*) and streamed a *Megillah* reading together. I donated money to Winnipeg Harvest and dropped off *mishloach manot* to a few friends. The care package from the *shul* helped create the spirit of the holiday. Being able to connect with my family in Ottawa over Zoom during holidays has been a lovely silver lining to this whole pandemic situation, though it's no replacement for in-person connections.



Hannah and Alex Schaeffer

**Marc Schaeffer:** We participated in the Etz Chayim Purim event. In particular, my kids enjoyed the dance party (though we failed to use the glow sticks to maximum effect). [Editor's note: The Schaeffer family also assembled the *mishloach manot* packages for participants of the Children and Family program and helped with delivery. And sources say, as revealed by the Schaeffer Zoom-screen, it wasn't only the Schaeffer kids who enjoyed the dance party.]

**Cindy Lazar:** We baked *hamantashen*, a ritual in itself. We make the filling using a hand-cranked food grinder my mother got with trading stamps in the 1950s. My kids



Photo: Kululudufij (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/deed.en>)

(Rachel and Jack) are now expert *hamantashen* pinchers. We made other baked goods as well and assembled and delivered *mishloach manot* packages to family and friends. We also participated in packing the *mishloach manot* packages that National Council of Jewish Women supplies to Jewish Child and Family Service clients. On *erev* Purim we read the *megillah* at home, taking turns, and making noise with our collection of *graggers*. We missed the Etz Chayim Purim Carnival last year.

**Sima Yakir Feuer:** We watched the virtual dance party. Everyone could see everyone else (on their Zoom screens) and you could feel the energy of families as if we were there. Barry (Kirshenbaum) did such a great job.

**Esther Samphir:** Pre-Covid, we always got together with some of the grandchildren and made *hamantashen*. I made the fruit filling (I buy the poppyseed) and they did the assembly. Then we exchanged *mishloach manot* with our kids (and grandkids) in Winnipeg and I'd send a parcel to the family in Toronto. We always had a *se'udah* for Purim.

With Covid, we baked *hamantashen* together on Zoom. I gave them my mother's recipe that I use, and they did their thing. Before Covid it was more personal, but with Zoom it felt like we were together.

When I was a kid growing up, Purim was the most fun, festive holiday. You could have sweets, you didn't have to fast, and I was always Queen Esther in every play because of my name. It's a fun holiday and it's one of success, because Queen Esther saved the day and gave the Jews freedom. ■



**M**arvin Samphir didn't represent many upstanding people during his law career. In fact, he didn't represent many people at all. "I wasn't on the side of the righteous, and I didn't represent individuals, I represented a corporation," says the retired municipal corporate lawyer. As lead counsel for the city of Winnipeg for most of his career, Marvin's job was a balance of litigation, labour law, arbitration, and court time, on all matters impacting the city.

"I tried to do the best I could with the talents G-d gifted me," he says. "I think I served the client well."

## Presumed Innocent

Marvin says throughout his career, his primary client—the City of Winnipeg—was not held in particularly high regard in the community. "But your job as a lawyer is not to represent the best client or the one society is on the side of," he says. "Your role is to represent individuals or corporations or government departments when their actions are being questioned. Every client deserves the best defense."

Many lawyers represent bad people, Marvin clarifies. "Do they know their client is not the salt of the earth? Probably, but that's irrelevant." This is thanks to section 11d of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms: "any person (or corporation) charged with an offence has the right to be presumed innocent until proven guilty according to law in a fair and public hearing."

"That's the remarkable thing about democracy," he says.

## Thomas Sophonow and J.J. Harper

Marvin was the lawyer for the Winnipeg Police Service in both the Thomas Sophonow Inquiry and the J.J. Harper Inquiry. Sophonow spent nearly four years in prison after being wrongfully convicted of the murder of Barbara Stoppel. He was exonerated of the crime in 2000. Harper, an Indigenous leader from Wasagamack,



Marvin Samphir

Manitoba, was shot and killed in 1988 by a Winnipeg police constable during an altercation. The Harper Inquiry was one of the catalysts of the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry, which investigated racism in Manitoba's justice system.



Marvin with Esther and grandchildren

"It's hard to understand whether something is racially motivated or not," Marvin says. Nonetheless, the Harper inquiry put the police department under the microscope and highlighted problems that can occur when the Indigenous community and members of the police force come face to face.

"There's no question we're all affected by our experiences," Marvin states. "Because of the work the police do in Winnipeg, sometimes with the Indigenous community, it can be instinctive, when they see someone on the street, to react. I don't think Harper would have been stopped in the street if he wasn't Indigenous. But whether the truth ever came out is a good question."

## Guilty as Charged

For a young lawyer starting out today, the world is a very different place from when Marvin began practising law, he says. The integrity of media has been compromised, thanks in part to worldwide access to the internet. Our system of democracy may also have been undermined. And while the courts still operate under the premise of innocent until proven guilty, in society that isn't always the case.

"Today, in some instances, people are guilty as charged by society before they get the chance to prove themselves innocent. Allegations are made about people, and whether they're true or not true is irrelevant. These people are forever burned," he says.

Marvin wonders if our jurisprudence is being influenced by society. "The scales of justice are supposed to tip in favour of the individual, not society," he says. But "they have tipped the other way."

"What's going to be 20 years from now? What kind of future is there for my grandchildren?" he asks.

## Pride and Joy

Marvin was born in Montreal; around age 10, his family moved to Roxton Pond, a small town within the Eastern Townships.

"In Montreal, I lived in an area that was all Jewish. I don't remember having a gentile friend until I moved to The Townships," he says. There, his family was the town's only Jews.

"It probably kept me Jewish," he says. "I appreciated the value of being a Jew and I didn't drift out of it."

When Marvin was 13, his family moved to Winnipeg, where he later met wife Esther and built a life with her. They have three kids and eight grandchildren: Joel is married to Naama and they have three children: Eytan, Liron, and Adiv. Daniel is married to Amy and their children are Hayley and Coby. Marni is married to Jonathan and they live in Toronto with children Sophie, Lily, and Leo.

Those eight grandchildren are who Marvin points to when asked what he is most proud of in life. "They are my legacy," says the past president of Congregation Etz Chayim (2014-2018).



A former jogger, Marvin now walks and cycles. "I can still bike 20, 25 miles," he says. He also enjoys gardening and recreational photography.

"I like taking lots of pictures. I used to fancy myself a photographer," he says, acknowledging he doesn't take as many photos as he once did.

"Everyone has their phones now, they don't need my pictures," he laughs. Indeed, just as the backdrop for practising lawyers has transformed over a few decades, so too has the landscape for photographers. ■

## ETZ CHAYIM PEOPLE

## Member News and Life-Cycle Events

### SPECIAL BIRTHDAYS

#### OCTOBER

Cynthia Aizenberg, Dina Frankel, Marcelo Josebachvili, Sam Katz, Ari Marantz, Gloria Mendelson, Carla Paul, Molly Rosenblatt, Alan Schacter, Sandra Shapiro, Fay Swartz

#### NOVEMBER

Darlene Davis, Naama Ukashi Samphir, Sally Singer

#### DECEMBER

Ilana Abrams, Jeff Goldstein, Cynthia Hiebert-Simkin, Barbara Hyman, Merrill Shulman, Donald Stern

#### JANUARY

Linda Calnitsky, Carla Goldstein, Lily Guberman, Javier Gurfinkiel, Todd Hochman, Regina Shiffman, Ruth Zimmer

### SPECIAL ANNIVERSARIES

#### OCTOBER

Gayle Freed and Gerald Stevenson (15); Karen Yamron Shpeller and Alan Shpeller (25); Viviana Steinberg and Daniel Faingold (25)

#### DECEMBER

Mel and Denny Hornstein (50)  
Alan and Anne Katz (40)  
Rebecca and Alan Schacter (55)

### IN MEMORIAM

Bessie Chisvin, Henry Katz, Larry Kraitberg, Edward Lazar, Judith Putter, Ewa Ukashi

### MAZEL TOVS

**Persio Cherman and Katia Dos Anjos** on the Bat Mitzvah of daughter **Rebecca**, November 20

**Marci Davis** on the Bar Mitzvah of son **Ben**, October 11

**Darlene and Jerry Davis** on the Bar Mitzvah of grandson **Ben**

**Sima Yakir Feuer** on the Bar Mitzvah of son **Aaron**, December 5

**Lainie Filkow and Bryan Borzykowski** on the Bat Mitzvah of daughter **Molly**, July 31

**Tara Kozlowich and Paul Shur** on the Bat Mitzvah of daughter **Samara**, September 18

**Marla and Adam Levene** on the Bat Mitzvah of daughter **Annie**, October 30

**Sherrill and David Levene** on the Bat Mitzvah of granddaughter **Annie**

**Cal Reich** on the Bar Mitzvah of son **Asher**, October 30

**Shani Reich and Marvin Sharp** on the B'nai Mitzvah of children **Ozios** and **Daliyah**, October 30

**Fay Reich** on the B'nai Mitzvah of grandchildren **Asher**, **Ozios**, and **Daliyah**

**Naama Ukashi Samphir and Joel Samphir** on the Bar Mitzvah of son **Adiv**, October 9

**Esther and Marvin Samphir** on the Bar Mitzvah of grandson **Adiv**

**Mimi and Earl Singer** on the Bat Mitzvah of granddaughter **Annie**

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Photos: The Picture &amp; the Poet

It isn't a *halakhic* requirement (Jewish law) to have a rabbi officiate at a Jewish wedding. So, when a couple asks Rabbi Kliel Rose to fulfill this multifaceted role for them, he does not take it lightly. He wants to be more than a "rent-a-rabbi."

"The intention is to be part of the couple's lives for a lifetime and hopefully have them arrive at seeing the enormous value of being connected to a congregation and the Jewish community," says Rabbi Kliel. "That entails investing time and effort into getting to know them as people."

Rabbi Kliel says he meets with a couple five to seven times before their wedding (via Zoom during pandemics). At the start, he is fulfilling his first responsibility to the couple as officiant: to educate them about *halakhic* requirements for a Conservative Jewish wedding and ensure that the obligations are met.

### Halakhic Standards

"As a Conservative Rabbi, I have to be clear about my *halakhic* standards—a traditional Jewish wedding has to line up with those standards," says Rabbi Kliel. He also feels committed to making sure the couple understands both the history and the significance of each element of the wedding ceremony. "I make a point of educating the couple about every detail," he says. He divides the list of possible elements for a Conservative Jewish wedding ceremony into those that are *halakhic* requirements and those that are optional *minhag* (customs which are not essential). The couple can include any Jewish wedding *minhag* that resonates for them. He points out that "just because a part of the traditional Jewish wedding ceremony is optional, it should not be viewed as insignificant or something we should just discard."

Educating the couple about Jewish wedding *halakha* helps them make informed choices about how their ceremony could unfold, Rabbi Kliel explains. Also, it encourages them to consider how much they would like him



to explain to guests, whether to include explanatory materials, and what kind of Hebrew-English balance they would like to have. While many couples opt for an annotated ceremony, Rabbi Kliel says, just as many choose to limit explanation, lest "too much verbiage take away from the sacredness of the moment or interfere with creating a particular kind of holy mood." But this decision he leaves up to the couple.

### One Jewish Wedding

Dena Stitz and Josh Palay were married late last summer, and Rabbi Kliel officiated at their ceremony. And while planning a wedding can involve an array of emotion—from joy to frustration, excitement to anxiety, apprehension to impatience—involving Rabbi Kliel in the preparation brought clarity and a sense of serenity for the couple.

"He helped make us feel calm and relaxed and like the ceremony was going to go smoothly. We loved working with him," Dena says. "From the first meeting we could tell how much he cares and likes doing weddings."

Dena and Josh first met with Rabbi Kliel about five months before their wedding date, to begin to unpack the possibilities for their ceremony. "Rabbi Kliel broke it down step by step, what each part of the wedding day could

incorporate and what the significance was. That felt easier to manage, to imagine what it was going to be, and pick what we wanted to do," says Josh.

Dena says Rabbi Kliel's efforts and care to explain each piece of the ceremony worked well for her and Josh. "We like to understand why we're doing things. He spent a lot of time making sure we both felt comfortable choosing, from the optional pieces, what was meaningful to us," she says.

### Contemporary, Egalitarian Ceremony

One optional tradition in an Ashkenazic Jewish ceremony is the *bedeken* or veiling ritual, when the groom places the veil on the bride's head, covering her face.

"We decided Josh would put the veil on my head not covering my face, that's what I was comfortable with. Then I would give him a *kippah* and place that on his head," says Dena, describing a modernization to the ritual that some couples choose.

"We spent a lot of time thinking about how to make it equal from a feminist perspective," she continues, adding there was no pressure from Rabbi Kliel to do the *bedeken* if they weren't comfortable with it. But they liked the modern spin on the longstanding Jewish tradition.





“The intention is to be part of the couple’s lives for a lifetime.”

The couple also wanted to include updated language in their *ketubah*, the Jewish marriage contract. “When you read the ketubah, it seems archaic, like you’re treating the bride-to-be as a possession,” Josh says. “When you read the text for the first time, you’re like, ‘oh, this is kind of intense.’” He acknowledges that when the older text was written, those clauses protected the woman if the marriage was dissolved.

“We didn’t want a text that we had to sign, or was hanging on our wall, that referred to coins and goats,” Dena laughs.

Josh says he felt a bit nervous to discuss the *ketubah* text with Rabbi Kliel. “I wasn’t sure if that was going to be a touchy subject or not,” Josh says. It wasn’t.

“He was almost excited to have that conversation,” says Josh.

“I think his response was, ‘I love this topic,’” Dena adds. “So, we had a great discussion about why the text was the way it was. But then he offered us a more modern but still Conservative *halakhic* text option that we felt comfortable with.”

Rabbi Kliel says he is flexible with couples adding creative

embellishments to their ceremony and with participation of family and friends in it. He encouraged Dena and Josh to bring some personal, family ritual-artifacts to the ceremony to make it uniquely their own. “We used my zaida’s *tallit* to wrap around us, and one of Josh’s baba’s *kiddush* cups, and a *kiddush* cup my baba had gifted to me,” explains Dena, an occupational therapist. “As those things were used, Kliel named where the items came from. It was a nice way to honour family that are no longer here. Rabbi Kliel says another part of his role as officiant for a Jewish wedding is to help prepare the couple for marriage. “As part of this process I give each couple homework—each member individually prepares responses on a variety of topics,” he says.

“Topics started off sort of basic, like, ‘How did you meet?’ and ‘What do you love about each other?’” says Josh. “But then it got pretty intense—sort of soul-searching questions that made you think, (like), ‘How do you imagine your family life as it relates to Judaism?’ and ‘How do you communicate?’” The couple then reviewed their responses with Rabbi Kliel at the subsequent meeting.

“It felt like he was prepared to help us plan not just the wedding but the marriage too,” adds Josh, who is training to be a child psychiatrist.

## What It’s All About

Dena and Josh were married August 29, 2021, in the large Headingley backyard of Dena’s relatives. They were surrounded by 80 family members and friends, guests who later showered the couple with positive sentiments about their *simcha*.

“People liked that it was meaningful and was so clearly a Conservative Jewish ceremony without feeling too traditional,” Dena says. “It was personal with modern touches, and I think people appreciated that.”

For several guests it was their first Jewish wedding. Non-Jewish guests liked Rabbi Kliel’s brief explanation at each part, the couple say. And while planning a wedding (particularly during a pandemic) can be challenging, working with Rabbi Kliel was grounding, say Dena and Josh.

“Our monthly meetings, where we were planning and preparing, and talking about the ceremony and our marriage, helped remind us what it was actually about,” Josh says. ■

Photo: Evan Swigart



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