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WISHING YOU A KESIVA V'CHASIMA TOVA!

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Dearest Readers,

Welcome to the *Tishrei* edition of The Journal of the Vaad HaRabanim of Greater Washington. We are excited to present you with an uplifting and informative issue for the *Yamim Noraim*.

This issue can be aptly titled, “Incredible People and Incredible Organizations.” As you read the Journal, you will be introduced to amazing people who impact our community and the broader Jewish world in significant ways: individuals who are making a difference in shul life, in their work environment, in the Jewish community, and beyond. They are being *mekadesh shem Shamayim* — sanctifying the name of Hashem — through their actions, activities, and efforts.

Read about two Orthodox judges who share insights and experiences from their important seats on the bench. Hear from two former shul presidents who bring us behind the scenes in the complex world of shul leadership. We hope you will be encouraged that there is no end to the impact that every person can have on our shuls, schools, community, and workplaces.

Be inspired by extraordinary organizations spanning the gamut of activities within and beyond greater Washington. See how the Capitol K managed a landmark catering event in Washington DC, from soup to nuts and everything in between. Read about how the world of *STa”M*, the production of *Sifrei Torah*, *tefillin* and *mezuzos*, is being upgraded — and the benefit these changes will yield for you and your home.

Learn about the incredible *hahnasas orchim* taking place in our community and the opportunity, now more than ever, for you to invite local individuals into your home. While the importance of every *mitzvah* and the holy institutions that advance them can never be overstated, looking out for those who feel lonely and detached is very close to my heart. I sincerely hope you will read these articles, consider the issues, and open your heart and home to someone in your shul, on your block, and in our community — for whom you can make a world of difference.

And, of course, tap into the sanctity of the upcoming season with two beautiful articles from community rabbis touching on the majesty of the Days of Awe and *Sukkos*.

My sincere thanks and deepest appreciation to Mrs. Mindy Tolchinsky for her tireless efforts and endless dedication to insightful editing of the Journal. We wish her and her husband Shmuel success and *nachas* on their move to Cleveland. Don’t worry: Mindy isn’t giving up her work at the Journal!

Thank you to Mrs. Wendy Guberman for her masterful graphic design and beautiful layout of the Journal, which enhance the reader’s enjoyment of each issue.

As always, please be in touch with any questions, comments, ideas, or suggestions for the Journal; we welcome your feedback.

May Hashem hear our prayers and bring us back *hayom* to *har kodshi* and *beis tefilasi*.

With warm wishes for a *Kesiva v’Chasima Tova*: a happy, healthy, and productive new year,

Rabbi Moshe Walter
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Message from the President
The Shofar's Cry: Light Breaking Through the Darkness

As the Rambam writes in *Hilchos Teshuva* (3:4), the *shofar* is not only a *mitzvah* of the Torah, but also a profound spiritual call that awakens the soul and inspires repentance. It proclaims the coronation of Hashem as our King and alludes to critical events in the spiritual development of the Jewish people: the *Akeidas Yitzchak* (the Binding of Isaac), the giving of the Torah at *Har Sinai*, and the future ingathering of the exiles in the era of *Mashiach*. Its *kol* (sound) penetrates the deepest recesses of the Jewish heart and, in so doing, establishes and reveals a powerful *chut shel chesed* — a transcendent bond of loving kindness between us and the *Ribbono Shel Olam*.

Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin *zt"l* devotes the entirety of Section 2 of *Nefesh HaChaim* to the *mitzvah* of *tefillah*. He cites the *Zohar*, which teaches that when a Jew prays from the depths of his heart with הַקּוֹל קוֹל יַעֲקֹב (the voice of Yaakov Avinu), it resonates with a קוֹל גָּדוֹל — a transcendent force that is מֵעוּמְקָא דְּכוּלָּא, deeper than all things. Commenting on this, Rabbi Yisroel Eliyahu Weintraub *zt"l* explains that the *kol* (the sound) is the *p'nimiyus* — the inner content, the soul — of a word. Thus, when Hashem spoke to the Jewish people at *Har Sinai*, His words were infused with the spiritual power of the *kol* upon which they were built.

In this light, we can better understand the awesome power of the *kol shofar*. It is the *p'nimiyus*, the soul, of our heartfelt prayers. It is the essence of our *neshamos* (our souls) and, as such, it connects to the *kol gadol* — the inner dimension of the world itself. The *shofar* is a beam of light piercing the darkness, a conduit of loving kindness in a world of *din* (judgment) and hardship.

For me personally, it serves as a reminder that Hashem created the world to bestow goodness upon His creatures (עוֹלָם חֶסֶד יִבָּנֶה), that He loves His *Am Segulah* (chosen nation), and that despite tragedies, antisemitism, and setbacks — personal, communal, and national — there is meaning in our struggles and hope for better days. Yet it must be acknowledged: this is a world of darkness and concealment.

The very first *pasuk* in *Eicha* declares:

אֵיכָה יָשְׁבָה בָדָד, הָעִיר רַבָּתִי עָם, הָיְתָה כְּאַלְמָנָה...

Alas, she sits in solitude,
the city once great with people has become like a widow.

With the *Churban HaBayis* (the destruction of the Temple), *Yerushalayim* became like a widow who longs for the *Ribbono Shel Olam*. The city misses His revealed presence: the regular, meaningful interactions and the feelings of closeness and companionship.

This imagery recalls an article written by Bob Green in 2021 in the *Wall Street Journal* after the death of Prince Philip, which left Queen Elizabeth a widow after 73 years of marriage. Green reflected that it makes no difference whether one is born into royalty or into poverty: when the spouse of a lifetime is gone, no one is powerful enough to hold back the silence. That silence is often loudest when one is surrounded by others. It is felt in the absence of

small, familiar details — the handwriting on a note left on a night table, whether on engraved palace stationery or a scrap of paper; the sound of a doorknob turning and the anticipation of a beloved voice; the look of veins on the back of a hand; the subtle signal of a private joke shared in a crowd; and the familiar words exchanged night after night, now silenced.

The *gemara* (*Taanis* 20a) draws a significant inference from the wording of the opening *pasuk* of *Eicha*. The verse does not say that the city became a widow — but that it became "like a widow." Rav Yehuda explains that this phrasing conveys a hidden blessing: we are not compared to a woman whose husband has died, but rather to one whose husband has gone overseas for an extended time and intends to return.

The transcendental sound of the *shofar* reminds us that Hashem, like such a husband, will return to us and once again be part of our daily lives, bringing joy to our hearts.

Rav Uren Reich, in his keynote address at the *Adirei HaTorah* gathering celebrating those who learn Torah, beautifully developed this idea. He cited the verse at the conclusion of the admonitions in *Parshas Bechukosai*:

וְאַף גַּם זֹאת בִּהְיוֹתָם בְּאֶרֶץ אֹיְבֵיהֶם,
לֹא מְאַסְתִּים וְלֹא גְעַלְתִּים לְכַלֹּתָם לְהָפֵר בְּרִיתִי אִתָּם,
כִּי אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹקֵיהֶם.

But despite all this, while they will be in the land of their enemies,
I will not have been revolted by them nor will I have rejected them to obliterate them,
to annul My covenant with them — for I am Hashem, their G-d. (Vayikra 26:44)

Even when *Klal Yisroel* is in exile, despised and persecuted, Hashem promises: לֹא מְאַסְתִּים — He will not despise His people; וְלֹא גְעַלְתִּים — He will not cast them away; לְכַלֹּתָם — He will not destroy them or annul His covenant, for He remains ה' אֱלֹקֵיהֶם — Hashem, their G-d.

Rav Reich cited the commentary of the *Chizkuni* on this verse, which confronts the question: Is this truly so? After all, the *Beis HaMikdash* was destroyed, we have been scattered among the nations, and those very nations scorn us. Are we not despised and cast aside? The *Chizkuni* answers that, although many gifts once given to us have been taken away, one gift endures — the Torah:

אִילּוּלֵי סֵפֶר תּוֹרָה שֶׁנִּשְׁתַּיֵּיר לָהֶם לְיִשְׂרָאֵל...

Were it not for the Torah that remains with the Jewish people, we would indeed have been forsaken.

The *Nefesh HaChaim* teaches that Hashem looked in the Torah and created the world:

אִסְתַּכֵּל בְּאוֹרַיְיתָא וּבָרָא עָלְמָא

The Torah is His deepest *machshavah* (thought) and most fundamental *ratzon* (desire): His blueprint for creation. Despite all the hardships of this prolonged and bitter *galus*, the Torah sustains our bond with Him. Through it, we are not abandoned.

Thus, the sound of the *shofar* reminds us of this precious legacy. It proclaims the greatness of being a Jew; the greatness of the Jewish soul; and the greatness of belonging to a *mamleches kohanim v'am segulah* (a kingdom of priests and the chosen nation). Even though the nations of the world may scorn us, we cherish our Jewishness, we are proud of our connection to Hashem, and we treasure the sound of the *shofar*.

One additional thing the sound of the *shofar* may allude to on Rosh HaShanah, *l'aniyus da'ati*: Based on the aforementioned *gemara* in *Taanis*, the *shofar* recalls the sound of a ship announcing its presence as it enters the harbor. Just as a lonely wife awaits the return of her husband from overseas, so too the Jewish people long for the revealed presence of the *Ribbono Shel Olam*. The *shofar*, like the horn of that arriving ship, announces His return. The resonance of the *kol Yaakov* with the *kol gadol* — the voice of Yaakov Avinu with that transcendent force — carries the promise of reunion, of fulfillment, and of renewed closeness with our Beloved.

With heartfelt wishes for a *Shana Tova u'Mesuka*,

Rabbi Yosef Singer

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Our Father in Heaven

Rabbi Dovid Rosenbaum, Young Israel Shomrai Emunah

"Is Hashem angry with me?"

"I feel like G-d keeps beating me down."

"Does He want to punish me?"

Some who read these words may be surprised — but these are sentiments that have been expressed to me by various people over the years. As we approach the Yamim Noraim, I believe it is worthwhile to revisit our perception of the dynamic between us and our Father in Heaven.

A word that appears numerous times in the davening of the season is *melech*: Hashem is our King. We are His subjects. It is our role to heed His commands and lead our lives as He instructs us.

Another word that we find, though not as frequently, is *av*: Hashem is our Father. What is the difference between the two words? Does not a parent instruct a child as to what should and should not be done?

Clearly, we are highlighting an emotional dynamic by referring to Hashem as not only our King, but as our Father as well. What is the nature of that dynamic? A common phrase that arises in this context is "*k'rachem av al banim*": we ask Hashem to have mercy on us as a father would for a child. Are there additional ways to relate to this emotional dynamic?

Our family recently suffered the loss of my dear father-in-law, Mr. Emil Braun, *z"l*. There was much said about him at the funeral and *shiva*: remembrances of both his personal essence and his communal contributions.

There was one specific aspect of his character that has given me much cause for reflection. A number of his children, in different contexts, have commented on how encouraging he was as a father. His children and their spouses chose very different paths in life and in their careers — yet each felt that they were making their father proud; none felt they had disappointed him. Not one of us chose the pursuit of science, his own career path, which he so loved. No matter. It is striking to reflect on the fact that each of his six children, *ka"h*, has built a home of Torah, *mitzvos*, and *chesed*, with all assuming leadership roles in their communities.

Perhaps this type of parent-child dynamic — which likely is more successful than great demands followed by expressions of disappointment — is part of what we can reflect on when we think of

our Father in Heaven. Of course Hashem has demands and expectations of each of us, as evidenced by the Torah and its many commandments. Yet He also sees the goodness within each and every one of us. Hashem rejoices when we succeed and when we actualize aspects of our potential that we perhaps never realized existed.

How valuable it would be for us to approach the Yamim Noraim with this perspective: Hashem knows my innate potential and experiences so much joy when I grow spiritually and find meaning in my life.

We are not perfect. If we view these days as Hashem's opportunity to note only our flaws, these will be days filled with stress and guilt. If, however, we view this season as an opportunity for Hashem to see how much closer we have come to actualizing our potential, and if we use these days for personal reflection as well, these days will be serious — but also hopeful!

If we find this perspective on our Father in Heaven to be meaningful, it would be worthwhile for all of us fortunate enough to be parents to reflect during these days on our relationships with our own children, and imagine how our children view that dynamic. For that matter, how do we view our relationships with all the people in our lives — be they spouses, relatives, friends, or colleagues? Do we appreciate them? Do we see their goodness? Are we hoping they succeed or anticipating their failure?

May each and every one of us merit to enter these Days of Awe with hope — not worry. May our relationship with Hashem be one of joyful growth — not of stressful failure.

Personally, I'm hoping that, through these reflections, I will approach each of my relationships a bit more like R' Azriel ben Moshe Eliezer, *z"l*. May these words be a *zechus* for his *neshamah*.

Sacred Splendor and the Species of Sukkot

Rabbi Brahm Weinberg, Kemp Mill Synagogue

Physical beauty is one of the defining features of our celebration of *Sukkot*. Our neighborhoods come alive with the sight of *sukkot*, each one uniquely and elegantly adorned, reflecting a collective desire to elevate the *mitzvah*. The *Shulchan Aruch* instructs us to bring our finest and most attractive dishes and utensils into the *sukkah*, while refraining from introducing anything that might detract from its graceful atmosphere.[1] Beauty takes on an even more central role in the *mitzvah* of the *arba minim*, the four species we lift on *Sukkot*. We take pride in selecting the most beautiful *etrog*, assembling a *lulav* that is fresh and vibrant, and ensuring that each of the *arba minim* embodies aesthetic excellence and fulfills the imperative of *hiddur mitzvah*, the beautification of a *mitzvah*.

The Torah describes the *etrog* as a "*pri etz hadar*" (the fruit of a beautiful tree)[2], a phrase that serves as the textual foundation for the halachic requirement of aesthetic beauty in the performance of the *mitzvah* of *arba minim*. The *Gemara*[3] offers several interpretations of the word *hadar*, one of which understands it to mean beauty. Accordingly, physical appearance becomes an essential criterion of halachic validity of the *etrog*. A blemished or unattractive *etrog* is therefore rendered unfit for use: *If boil-like blemishes arose on the majority [of the etrog]; if its pitom was removed…it is unfit.*[4]

This emphasis on beauty is not limited to the *etrog* alone. The *Gemara*[5] records a debate among the *Tannaim* as to whether the requirement of *hadar* extends from the *etrog* to the other three species. The *halacha* follows the view of the *Chachamim*, who assert that beauty is, indeed, a necessary attribute of *all* four species.[6] This principle is reflected in the third chapter of *Masechet Sukkah*, which teaches that *any* of the four species that is dried out, having lost its freshness and visual appeal, is invalid.[7] Thus, the halachic system not only permits, but demands, that the *arba minim* embody a standard of aesthetic excellence. So central is this ideal that the *Shulchan Aruch* rules that if a person initially purchased a basic *etrog* and later came across one that is larger and more beautiful, they are required to spend up to one-third more in order to acquire the superior one.[8]

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[1] *Shulchan Aruch OC* 639:1
[2] *Vayikra* 23:40
[3] *Sukkah* 29b
[4] *Mishnah Sukkah* 3:6
[5] *Sukkah* 31a
[6] Some *Rishonim*, such as the Ritva (*Sukkah* 31a), suggest that, while the requirement of *hadar* applies to all four species according to the *Chachamim*, there remains a qualitative distinction between the *etrog* and the other *minim*. When the *Torah* attaches the term *hadar* specifically to the *etrog*, it establishes the obligation of *hadar* as part of the very definition of the *etrog* species, whereas in the other species it is not as defining of a feature and that results in halachic differences in a case of pressing need or scarcity.
[7] *Mishnah Sukkah* 1:1-7
[8] *Shulchan Aruch OC* 656:1

Another holiday where *hiddur mitzvah* plays a prominent role is in the observance of *Chanukah*. Historically, the impulse of the *Chashmonaim* in the aftermath of the military victory and the cleansing of the *Beit HaMikdash* was to beautify the kindling of the *menorah* in whatever way possible. The golden *menorah* in the *Beit HaMikdash* had been pillaged by the Assyrian Greeks, so the *Chashmonaim* had to improvise by creating a rough *menorah* constructed of iron spears. Even though the iron spears were nowhere near as beautiful as the original golden *menorah*, they were halachically valid for lighting the *menorah*. Yet the *Gemara* recounts that the *Chashmonaim* had the impulse to make the *menorah* and the lights it displayed beautiful. Over time, they coated the iron spears of the makeshift *menorah* with the most precious metals they could find in order to achieve that aim.[9]

The concern that the *Chashmonaim* displayed for the aesthetic dimension of lighting the *menorah* in the rededicated *Beit HaMikdash* shaped the character of the *mitzvah* of *Chanukah* lights commemorating that event for all generations. The *Gemara*[10] presents the enactment of *Chanukah* lights as a three-tiered *mitzvah*: At the very basic level, one could fulfill the *mitzvah* by lighting one candle per household per night. To fulfill the *mitzvah* in a beautiful fashion, one would have to light one candle per person per night. Finally, if one wished to perform the *mitzvah* in the *most* beautiful fashion, one would have to light multiple candles per person per night. Additional lights add aesthetic quality to the *mitzvah*, thus increasing visibility, impact upon onlookers, and publicization of the miracle.[11]

The notion that *halacha* places value upon the aesthetic is not limited to the holidays of *Sukkot* and *Chanukah* at all.[12] In fact, the *Gemara* concretizes the value of physical beauty into action by specifying that *mitzvot*, in general, are to be performed in a beautiful manner — generating the halachic requirement known as *hiddur mitzvah*:

> For it was taught [in a *Braita*]: This is my G-d, and I will adorn him: [i.e.,] Adorn thyself before Him in [the fulfillment of] precepts. [Thus:] make a beautiful *sukkah* in His honor, a beautiful *lulav*, a beautiful *shofar*, beautiful fringes, and a beautiful Scroll of the Law, and write it with fine ink, a fine reed, and a skilled penman, and wrap it about with beautiful silks.[13] [14]

The *Gemara* in *Masechet Bava Kama* even says that one could spend up to an added third above the cost of a given *mitzvah* in order to beautify it: *R. Zeira said: When it comes to hiddur mitzvah – up to a third of the mitzvah.*[15]

Hiddur mitzvah mandates that, in many cases, we enhance the basic performance of a *mitzvah* by beautifying it in some way. While *Chanukah* and *Sukkot* may be prime examples and manifestations of this principle, and while they may possess unique aspects to their fulfillment, they also fit into the larger patterns of *hiddur mitzvah*.[16]

Instinctively, one might imagine a stark divide between the spiritual and the aesthetic. Teleological activity (actions directed towards a desired end whether it be religious, ethical, or moral) involves abstraction, distant vision, contemplation of the intangible, and grappling with goals that can never be fully achieved. This kind of thinking and behavior, especially in the realm of religion, involves the contemplation of transcendence, of the unknown, of the unreachable in terms of godliness and even in terms of our own human perfection. By contrast, the aesthetic is about immanence; it is about perceived immediacy. The aesthetic involves dealing with what is before you and what is knowable.

Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch[17] uses the spiritual and the aesthetic as the paradigms of seemingly *dichotomous* pursuits in distinguishing the Jewish people from the ancient Greeks. As Noach

[9] *Menachot* 28b
[10] *Shabbat* 21a
[11] This explanation of the levels of beauty follows the understanding of the Rambam in *Mishneh Torah Hilchot Chanukah* 4:1. The *Tosafot* quote the Ri, who had a different understanding of this *Gemara*. The Ri suggests that, above and beyond the basic *mitzvah* of one candle per household, there are two different options which do not build off each other (as opposed to the three-tiered understanding of the Rambam). The first option for beautification above the standard *mitzvah* is *mehadrin*, which is one candle per person per night. The second option is *mehadrin min hamehadrin*, which is one person adding an additional candle per night. What is extremely interesting is when you look at the *Shulchan Aruch* and the Rema in *OC* 671:2, the *Shulchan Aruch* follows the Ri and the Rema follows the Rambam. As the Taz points out in his commentary, this is the opposite of what usually occurs (the *Shulchan Aruch* usually follows the Sefardic tradition of the Rambam and the Rema usually follows the Ashkenazic tradition of the *Baalei HaTosafot*). Rabbi Soloveitchik had a different explanation of this divide: see *Harerei Kedem,* Vol 1 *Siman* 162.
[12] There are at least seven connections historically, halachically, practically, and textually between *Sukkot* (a Biblical holiday of 8 days) and *Chanukah* (a Rabbinic holiday of 8 days). See *Rokeach Hil Chanukah* 225 and *Sfat Emet Chanukah* 5641 for examples.
[13] *Shabbat* 133b
[14] It should be noted that a more thorough analysis of *hiddur mitzvah* would be necessary in order to properly assess the statement made in this *Gemara*. Some of the examples cited are action-oriented beautification like "a skilled penman," whereas others are about the beautification of the object through which the *mitzvah* is performed like "a beautiful *shofar*." Furthermore, in some cases (most notably *lulav* [or *etrog*]) the requirement of *hiddur* seems to be intrinsic to the fulfillment of the *mitzvah,* whereas in others it is an added requirement without which the *mitzvah* can still be fulfilled.
[15] *Bava Kama* 9b
[16] In fact, Rabbeinu Chananel (*Shabbat* 21b) says that the meaning of *mehadrin* in lighting *Chanukah* candles is like all cases of *mehadrei mitzvot*, beautifiers of *mitzvot*, as described in other passages of the *Gemara* such as *Bava Kama* 9b. Rashi (*Sukkah* 29b "*Yavesh*") , connects the *hiddur* of the *arba minim* to the broader mandate of *hiddur mitzvah* and even sources the requirement in the *pasuk* of *zeh keli v'anvehu*, which is the *Gemara's* source for the broader mandate of *hiddur* in all *mitzvot*. The other *Rishonim* (including *Tosafot* as loc) question how Rashi could make such a leap when the *Gemara* itself had quoted the *pasuk* of *pri etz hadar* as the source for beauty in *arba minim* and when there are such significant halachic differences between *hiddur* in *arba minim* and *hiddur* in other *mitzvot*. On the other hand, *Tosafot* themselves admit that in the discussion of the requirement for the binding of the *lulav*, the *Gemara* (11b) cites the *pasuk* of *zeh keli v'anvehu* and the mandate of "*v'anvenu, hitna'eh lefanay b'mitzvot,*" which is the mandate of *hiddur mitzvah* in general.
[17] R. Samson Raphael Hirsch, 1808–1888 Germany

emerges from his drunkenness to make proclamations about his children, he says: *G-d enlarge Japheth, and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem*.[18] Rav Hirsch[19] explains this blessing as an indication of what the descendants of Shem and Japheth would accomplish in the world:

> The stem of Japheth reaches its fullest blossoming in the Greeks; that of Shem in the Hebrews, Israel…Japheth has ennobled the world aesthetically. Shem has enlightened it spiritually and morally.

At times, it seems that aesthetic beauty is not merely distinct from spiritual ambition, but even opposed to it and viewed as something to be denigrated for its potential to distract, deceive, or lead to futility. A classic example is the well-known *pasuk* in *Mishlei*:

שֶׁקֶר הַחֵן וְהֶבֶל הַיֹּפִי ׀ אִשָּׁה יִרְאַת ה׳ הִיא תִתְהַלָּל.
Grace is deceptive and beauty is vain;
a woman who fears the Lord is the one to be praised.[20]

If this is indeed so, why would *halacha* call for the pursuit of an aesthetic quality in the performance of *mitzvot*?

This dichotomy is especially striking when we contemplate the *Mishkan* and the *Beit HaMikdash*. Beauty emerges as a central and deliberate feature in the construction of both structures, reflecting the Torah's embrace of aesthetic excellence in sacred architecture.

In *Parshat Terumah*, the detailed instructions for the *Mishkan* emphasize not only function but visual splendor: gold, silver, and copper; intricately woven tapestries of turquoise, purple, and crimson wool; and acacia wood overlaid with precious metals.[21] Even seemingly technical architectural details reflect this value. The *Torah* mandates that the excess length of the *Mishkan's* tapestries should hang down over the sides of the structure to cover it, and Rashi comments that this teaches *derech eretz*, a lesson in proper conduct, that a person should be careful to preserve and protect what is beautiful.[22]

The *Mishkan's* vessels, such as the *aron*, the *menorah*, and the *shulchan*, are designed with ornate detail and artistic craftsmanship, culminating in the selection of Betzalel, who is described as being endowed with "a divine spirit of wisdom, insight, and knowledge in all craftsmanship,"[23] highlighting the spiritual value of artistic skill.

Similarly, the *Beit HaMikdash* built by Shlomo HaMelech is described in *Sefer Melachim I* (Chapters 6–7) with great attention to grandeur and beauty: walls lined with cedar, overlaid with

[18] *Bereishit* 9:27
[19] Ad loc.
[20] *Mishlei* 31:30
[21] *Shemot* 25–26
[22] *Shemot* 26:13
[23] *Shemot* 31:3

gold; intricately carved decorations of gourds and flowers; and vessels of gleaming bronze. It is paradoxical that the place where G-d's Presence is most manifest, a space meant to draw the heart heavenward, would be adorned with such rich and elaborate physical beauty.

But perhaps the very question itself — why the *Mishkan,* as the epitome of holiness and transcendence, would be focused on beauty — already contains the seeds of its own answer.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, in his essay on aesthetics in Judaism in *Worship of the Heart*,[24] clarifies that spirituality and aesthetics *can* indeed be at odds with each other. Excessive focus on externality is antithetical to *Torah* thinking. Physicality is a force that can distract mankind from the spiritual aims for which we were created and cause us to become self-absorbed to the point where we forget our Creator.

Nevertheless, while that *can* be the effect of beauty, it is not its sole effect. The aesthetic experience can play a role for the human being, even in the spiritual realm, which is pure, holy, and laudable. Aesthetics can be redeemed and elevated if utilized in the pursuit of the transcendental. Within a superficial, unredeemed aesthetic experience, a person simply strives for subjective pleasure and immediacy with no loftier aims. In order to elevate the aesthetic, it must be used to direct the eye and heart of humankind *away* from the self to loftier, more remote, more transcendental goals above our finite existence:

> If the aesthetic experience is to be cleansed and redeemed, it must express the transcendental yearning in man. Hence, it must always be encountered as a reflection of Divine beauty. It must direct the human eye toward the remote, infinite and exalted, suggest to the human being a nobler and sacred world, another order of existence. There is an eternal vision that beckons it to the estate, which fascinates and pulls him towards unknown distances and unchartered lands. There is an ideal in the world of beauty as there is in the realm of ethics, an ideal that will never be completely attained. At this point we arrive at religious experience.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks articulates a similar idea:

> The Greeks, and many in the Western world who inherited their tradition, believed in the holiness of beauty...Jews believed in the opposite: *hadrat kodesh*, the beauty of holiness: "Give to the Lord the glory due to His name; worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness" (Psalms 29:2). Art in Judaism always has a spiritual purpose: to make us aware of the universe as a work of art, testifying to the supreme Artist, G-d Himself.[25]

[24] *Toras HoRav* Foundation, 2003
[25] "The Beauty of Holiness or the Holiness of Beauty"

> There is a place for the aesthetic in *avodah*. In the words of the Song at the Sea: *Zeh Keili Ve-anvehu*, *this is my G-d and I will beautify Him*. For beauty inspires love, and from love flows the service of the heart.[26]

Our Sages valued the aesthetic experience of the human being. In fact, they were keenly aware of the great impact that beauty can have on the experience of the human being. In a remarkable passage in *Masechet Shabbat*, the *Gemara* explains that "three things expand the mind of man: a beautiful house, a beautiful wife, and beautiful possessions."[27] External physical beauty utilized in the purest way can serve to reveal something non-tangible that lies much deeper. Aesthetics can reflect an inner quality that is transmitted to the world in the form of external beauty.

Commenting on the difference between the oft-used words *hod* and *hadar* in *Tanach*, the Malbim[28] says:

> *Hadar* refers to external beauty…In contrast, *hod* refers to an internal, form-based quality that beautifies a thing from within, according to its essence…Hence, the phrase 'the *hadar* of the glory of Your *hod'* means: the revelation of essential inner *hod* through an external expression of *hadar*. Whenever we find the terms *hod* and *hadar* together, it implies the inner spiritual beauty (*hod*) and the outer expressive majesty (*hadar*).[29]

Crucially, the Malbim notes that true beauty emerges when *hadar* reveals *hod* — when outer beauty expresses something deeper, sacred, and transcendent. Beauty, in Judaism, is not an end in itself. It is valid and elevated when it acts as a vessel for inner meaning, spiritual integrity, or Divine presence. This harmonization of surface and soul — "the *hadar* of *hod,*" as he calls it — is the highest form of aesthetic value.

Judaism recognizes the power of the aesthetic and aims to transcendentalize it so it becomes not an end in and of itself, but a means towards human growth, especially in the pursuit of spirituality. In other words, Judaism places value upon the aesthetic because of how it can help us to achieve transcendence. In fact, we rely on it to help get us there. As Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch says:

> The abundance of beauty of every kind which we are given in this, our world, and the fact that — as far as we know — Man is the only creature that had been provided with the ability to enjoy beauty for itself, proves what value the Creator lays on this aesthetic sense for the spiritual-moral calling of Man.[30]

[26] "The Aesthetic in Judaism"
[27] *Brachot* 57b
[28] R. Meir Leibush Weiser, 1809–1879 Russia
[29] Malbim commentary to *Vayikra* 19:15
[30] R. S.R. Hirsch, Commentary to the Torah: *Bereishit* 2:9

The *Mishkan*, the epitome of transcendental holiness, is so replete with physical beauty — because this is the very space in which that beauty is redeemed in service of the higher purpose of being awed by the experience of the Divine. This is why G-d himself is the paradigm of beauty, the perfect union of the spiritual and the aesthetic. G-d is described in *Tehillim* thus:

ה׳ אֱלֹקַי, גָּדַלְתָּ מְאֹד ; הוֹד וְהָדָר לָבָשְׁתָּ.
Hashem my G-d, Thou art very great;
Thou art clothed with glory and beauty.[31]

The *arba minim* must possess beauty because they are intended to elevate our souls and direct our focus toward the sublime power of Hashem — Who alone fills the universe with His glory and brings rain, abundance, and every form of goodness to the world we inhabit. The appearance of the *arba minim* is meant to arrest our attention, stir within us a sense of awe, and transport us to loftier realms. They are to be as physically flawless as possible, not because aesthetic perfection holds intrinsic value, but because it has the power to move the human spirit, to awaken wonder, and to inspire a deeper spiritual response.

The English poet, John Keats, once said: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty — that is all/Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."[32] The *hiddur*, beautification, of the *arba minim* which we take this *Sukkot* frames our approach to beauty differently. It teaches us that beauty is *not* truth but a critical component in the *search* for truth, in the *search* for the transcendental, in the *search* for what is beyond our reach. Beauty is what can move us in the most profound way: to help transport us towards that which is beyond our reach and beyond our comprehension.

[31] *Tehillim* 104:1
[32] John Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn"

Reflections on Being an Orthodox Jewish Judge

The Honorable Michele Loewenthal
Judge, Orphans' Court for Baltimore City

עֹשֶׂה מִשְׁפַּט יָתוֹם וְאַלְמָנָה...
Carries out the judgment of the orphan and widow… (*Devarim* 10:18)

While Hashem is the true judge of all, including orphans and widows, my assignment as a judge is to oversee the lawful distribution of assets to those very same people.

I was born in Philadelphia, but was raised in Silver Spring. My family was very active in Temple Israel, a Conservative synagogue located in Silver Spring at the time. My family and Jewish education instilled in me the enduring importance of my Jewish heritage. This strong foundation in Judaism remained a guiding principle throughout my public school and college years.

My path to law began during my undergraduate studies at the University of Maryland, College Park. I joined the Maryland Public Interest Research Group (MaryPIRG) and began lobbying for important legislation in Annapolis. A key focus of our work was advocacy for a proposed law allowing generic drug substitution. This hands-on experience ignited my interest in becoming a lawyer.

Following graduation from college with a major in Government and Politics, I embarked on a year of study in Israel. This immersive experience proved transformative, leading me to embrace observant Orthodox Judaism. Upon my return, I entered the University of Maryland School of Law in Baltimore, graduating three years later. I currently live in the *frum* community in Baltimore with my husband and we attend Kehilath B'nai Torah synagogue. Our children reside in Baltimore, New York, Florida, and Israel.

My early legal career encompassed various legal practice areas, initially full-time, then transitioning to part-time after the birth of my first child. Most of my legal work involved family, juvenile, and personal injury law. I handled several estate cases, which introduced me to the Orphans' Court for Baltimore City.

When an opening on the court became available, I applied — and in 2011, was honored to be appointed by Governor Martin O'Malley as a judge on the Orphans' Court for Baltimore City. The judges serve four-year terms, running for election concurrently with the governor and state legislators.

The Orphans' Courts serve as Maryland's probate courts, overseeing the administration of estates. Our primary role is to supervise the administration of the estates of people who have passed away, whether or not they had a will. The judges direct the conduct of personal representatives and issue court orders necessary for the proper administration of the estate of a deceased person (known as a *decedent*).

Orphans' Courts were created under the Acts of 1777 and were established in each Maryland county and Baltimore City. In 1851, their judges became constitutional judges. In Montgomery, Harford, and Howard Counties, the judges of the Circuit Court alternately act as Orphans' Court judges. All other Maryland jurisdictions, including Baltimore City, have three dedicated Orphans' Court judges.

Disputes among surviving family members occur, regardless of whether a will exists. While having a will clearly outlining an individual's wishes for asset distribution is always preferable, it doesn't always prevent conflict. I have presided over cases in which a will distributed all assets among four children, yet they still quarreled over specific items such as jewelry, cars, furnishings, and even the family home. This underscores the importance of being incredibly detailed in a will, specifying who should receive each item upon death. When a person dies without a will, asset distribution follows Maryland's laws of intestacy.

Family members frequently petition the court to remove the personal representative, or executor, of the estate. Allegations often include lack of communication, failure to distribute money or property — or even outright theft of assets. These cases are particularly sad; family members describe how the death of a relative has fractured a once-united family, leading to bitter conflicts over money and property.

There are occasions when my duty to follow the law leads to decisions that, on the surface, may appear unfair. For example, I heard a case in which a woman, the decedent's girlfriend, had been paying for the mortgage, taxes, and upkeep of the house, which was solely owned by the decedent. She claimed that he verbally promised her the house. However, without a will or deed legally transferring ownership, I had to inform her that she could not assume ownership of the home. My role requires adherence to legal written documentation, not verbal promises.

Another interesting scenario arises with a caveat to a will, which is a challenge to its validity. For example, there could be a will dated in 2016, leaving all assets to a decedent's children. A second will, dated in 2022, could leave all assets to the decedent's second wife and none to the children. The decedent's children could file a caveat to the second will, alleging that the decedent wasn't of sound mind when he signed the second will, was under undue influence from his second wife, and/or that fraud occurred because the decedent was unaware he was signing a will leaving all assets to his second wife. These cases are highly challenging, because it is the judge's responsibility to determine the veracity of these allegations by relying on testimony and medical or other evidence.

As a judge, I bear the significant responsibility of making decisions that profoundly impact people's lives. Those who appear before me in court to provide testimony swear or affirm, under the penalties of perjury, to tell the truth. My role is to provide people an opportunity to present their case and to listen attentively to their arguments. I must determine the facts, assess

credibility, and analyze the facts in accordance with the law. When there is room for flexibility or discretion, I exercise it in issuing my court orders. I maintain excellent working relationships with my fellow judges on this court and in other jurisdictions, often discussing difficult cases and learning from each other's experiences. My colleagues are aware of my Orthodox Jewish faith and are very respectful towards me.

Beyond my courtroom duties, I am actively involved in Orphans' Court organizations. I am one of fourteen judge members on the Conference of Orphans' Court judges and I chair its Subcommittee on Policy, Rules, and Forms. The Conference advises the Chief Judge of the Supreme Court of Maryland about issues affecting the Orphans' Court. My subcommittee duties include drafting and proposing any rule or form changes deemed beneficial to our court, which undergo review by several committees before implementation. I also serve as the Treasurer of the Maryland Association of Judges of the Orphans' Court, which monitors legislation affecting the court, provides education and mentoring to judges, and fosters stronger relationship among judges.

When presiding over cases, I view my role as a resolver of disputes — not as "sitting in judgment" of others. Sometimes I suggest that the parties go into the hallway to talk to each other and try to reach an agreement. While people from different backgrounds and nationalities appear in my court, I find that the conflicting issues are the same, regardless of the families' religious or cultural background. I take care to explain my findings of fact and court orders in language that can be understandable to those appearing before me.

As we approach Yom HaDin, we know that Hashem acts as a judge, listening to our pleas and evaluating whether we have earned the right to a favorable judgment. Just as we strive to present ourselves in the most positive light in a civil courtroom, we hope to do so in the "courtroom" of Hashem. A critical distinction between the two, however, is that Hashem knows the truth — even about our most private actions. We cannot deceive Him. While I, as a human judge, strive diligently to discern the truth, Hashem is fully aware of our deeds.

Let us pray that our sincerity and best efforts will lead Hashem to exercise His discretion and grant us a favorable judgment for the coming year.

Some Thoughts on Judges, Judging, and Judgment

The Honorable Matthew H. Solomson
Chief Judge, U.S. Court of Federal Claims

Upon graduating law school, I began my career as one of two law clerks for the Hon. Francis M. Allegra, a judge on the U.S. Court of Federal Claims — the court on which I now serve as Chief Judge.[1] As a second-year law student, I had sent applications to several dozen federal judges in the Washington, DC area, but secured less than a handful of interviews. Federal judicial clerkships are extremely competitive. When I arrived for my interview with Judge Allegra, I was greeted by an official portrait of the Pope, prominently displayed on the wood-paneled walls of the judge's chambers — a gift from the Vatican itself. Towards the end of my interview, Judge Allegra asked me what I enjoyed doing in my spare time. I answered, among other things, that I was attempting to complete a rabbinic ordination exam. To my surprise, the judge immediately challenged me to identify a particular yeshiva in Cleveland near the Catholic seminary he had attended before becoming a lawyer. "Telz," I replied, confidently; "I have had teachers who studied there." Judge Allegra shook his head in disappointment: "No, that's not it," he said. And then I remembered — from the Chanukah candle boxes that the yeshiva used to distribute as a fundraiser — that its official English spelling is "Telshe." When I pronounced it *that* way, the judge replied, "Yes, that's the one." It turns out that the judge had once been on track to become a Catholic priest, and was intrigued by my rabbinic studies. I was hired the next day. With the job, I acquired both a teacher and a friend, to paraphrase the *Mishnah* in *Avos*.

Judge Allegra, who sadly died while still in his prime, was an exceedingly honest man of faith. At times, he could have taken advantage of his position (albeit in narrow ways), but, as my father says, having a conscience is the belief that there is an עַיִן רוֹאָה — God is watching — and that is the way the judge lived. He would never even come close to the ethical line. When we were in Seattle for a week of trial — our court is one of just three National Courts with the power to hold proceedings anywhere in the country — Judge Allegra needed additional clothes. One evening, he asked me to accompany him to a department store to buy a few new clothing items. I suggested that he use the hotel laundry service to save time, but the judge balked at that idea because it was so expensive. Although laundry service would have been a reimbursable expense, he could not bring himself to spend public money for his convenience. I then asked whether he would seek reimbursement for his clothes purchase because it was less costly than the laundry (as he had saved the public money). He would do no such thing, however, because new clothing was *not* a properly reimbursable expense. While he would not have had to provide a receipt and was saving the government money, he would not engage in any sort of contorted *pilpul* (casuistry) to justify an impermissible expense. To this day, I frequently advise young lawyers (and budding businesspeople): if have you to apply some convoluted *sevara* (reasoning) to justify your behavior,

[1] Law clerks assist the judge in performing legal research, preparing for arguments or trials, deciding cases, and drafting orders and opinions.

there's a good chance you're going to prison. It's not worth it for you, your family, or the resulting *Chillul Hashem* (desecration of God's name).

Although Judge Allegra could be incredibly tough on attorneys appearing before him — he had little patience for poorly reasoned arguments — I also saw him live up to the principle of *imitatio dei* (a Latin term meaning "imitation of God," it is a theological concept emphasizing humanity's obligation to emulate God's actions and attributes).[2] On one occasion, I witnessed Judge Allegra demonstrate remarkable אֶרֶךְ אַפַּיִם (slowness to anger) and respect for elders. A much older lawyer was arguing his case at the courtroom podium when his cell phone rang rather loudly. The lawyer could not figure out how to turn it off. I think I audibly gasped. Surely this lawyer was going to be harshly admonished, and perhaps even sanctioned, for disrespecting the court. When the lawyer then asked for a brief recess to return the call, I honestly thought his world might end. But Judge Allegra, clearly sympathetic to the man's age, calmly granted the lawyer's request. Upon his return to court, the lawyer apologized; Judge Allegra simply asked him to confirm that the phone was off for the duration of the argument. Without a doubt, most judges would not have been so understanding. Indeed, any judge would have been justified in calling out the lawyer for disrespecting the court. I asked Judge Allegra about his response; he replied that he could not embarrass an old man who obviously did not know how to use his phone and did not intend to disrespect the court.

Judge Allegra was not only a shining example of probity; he also taught me how to do judging right. A most memorable lesson came early in my clerkship. I had asked how he wanted to rule in a particular case: in favor of the plaintiff or defendant. He looked at me quizzically. I explained that each side had presented compelling arguments in their respective briefs; I could easily write the opinion either way. I asserted that the arguments were, in legal terms, in equipoise — perfectly balanced, with no clear winner. All the judge had to do was make the call. His rebuke was forceful: "I do not believe in 'equipoise' and that is *not* how we decide cases." He explained that if I thought the arguments were in equipoise, it meant I hadn't adequately considered the arguments or performed sufficient legal research. He sent me back to my office to review the arguments until I was convinced that one side was definitively correct. "Once you are convinced," Judge Allegra instructed, "let's discuss your view of the case." The lesson was clear: invoking "equipoise" and simply picking a winner was lazy and would not constitute justice. Reason and rationale must carry the day; you must be as certain as possible about the correctness of the outcome.

[2] This principle is taught in *Shabbos* 133b:

אַבָּא שָׁאוּל אוֹמֵר: ״וְאַנְוֵהוּ״ — הֱוֵי דּוֹמֶה לוֹ, מָה הוּא חַנּוּן וְרַחוּם — אַף אַתָּה הֱיֵה חַנּוּן וְרַחוּם.

See also Sifri, Devarim 49:

ללכת בכל דרכיו, אלו הן דרכי מקום (שמות ל״ד:ו): ה׳ א-ל רחום וחנון ואומר (יואל ג:ה) והיה כל אשר יקרא בשם ה׳ ימלט. וכי היאך איפשר לו לאדם לקרא בשמו של מקום? אלא נקרא המקום רחום אף אתה היה רחום; הקדוש ברוך הוא נקרא חנון אף אתה היה חנון, שנאמר (תהלים קמה:ח) חנון ורחום ה׳ וגו׳. ועשה מתנות חנם, נקרא המקום צדיק, שנאמר (שם יא:ז) כי צדיק ה׳ צדקות אהב, אף אתה היה צדיק. נקרא המקום חסיד שנאמר (ירמיה ג:יב) כי חסיד אני נאם ה׳, אף אתה היה חסיד...

That lesson has stayed with me. In my chambers, we debate issues at great length and consider all angles before arriving at a final decision. I encourage my law clerks to tell me when they think I'm wrong; I do not want "yes men" or "yes women." Keeping an open mind is critical. And from time to time, my clerks indeed convince me to change my view of a case.

Well after I had entered practice, I continued to learn from Judge Allegra. He disdained sophistic, overly creative legal analysis, and I learned that lesson the hard way. At the time, I was a trial attorney with the U.S. Department of Justice, defending the government in a case before him. I had moved to dismiss the case based on what I thought was a decent *chidush*, you might say — based on a novel reading of particular statutory and regulatory language. The judge denied my motion, dismantling my argument from top to bottom. He began his opinion with this quote from the Supreme Court of the United States (*Lynch v. Alworth-Stephens Co.*, 267 U.S. 364, 370 (1925)): "[T]he plain, obvious and rational meaning of a statute is always to be preferred to any curious, narrow, hidden sense that nothing but the exigency of a hard case and the ingenuity and study of an acute and powerful intellect would discover." It was his way of kindly complimenting my creativity, while criticizing me for contorting the *pshat* (straightforward meaning). I learned the hard way that overly inventive, complicated arguments are often losers. A theory that may make for a good *shiur* does not win cases. Lawyers, like scientists, should take account of Occam's Razor: the principle that the simplest explanation is usually the best one.

* * * *

As a law clerk, a lawyer, and now a judge myself, I have always felt very blessed to play a small role in the American justice system. To paraphrase Churchill's quip, it's the worst system except for all the others. The text and structure of the U.S. Constitution reflect awe-inspiring wisdom, a deep understanding of human nature, and a groundbreaking commitment to individual liberty and the pursuit of justice. Our Founding Fathers were truly inspired by God.[3]

I will even make the bold claim that, in my role as a judge, I am privileged to engage in work whose very essence is a *mitzvah*. The *Tur*, in the first *siman* of *Choshen Mishpat* (*Hilchos Dayanim*), emphasizes — in a rather surprising, universalist message — that maintaining a justice system is critical to a functioning society:

רַבָּן שִׁמְעוֹן בֶּן גַּמְלִיאֵל אוֹמֵר עַל ג׳ דְּבָרִים הָעוֹלָם קַיָּים עַל הַדִּין וְעַל הָאֱמֶת וְעַל הַשָּׁלוֹם פי׳ ה״ר יוֹנָה ז״ל אֵין פֵּירוּשׁוֹ שֶׁבִּשְׁבִיל ג׳ דְּבָרִים אֵלּוּ נִבְרָא הָעוֹלָם שֶׁהֲרֵי בִּתְחִילַת הַפֶּרֶק אוֹמֵר עַל ג׳ דְּבָרִים הָעוֹלָם עוֹמֵד וְאֵינָם אֶלּוּ שֶׁזּוֹכֶר כַּאן ... וְכַאן אָמַר הָעוֹלָם קַיָּים פֵּירוּשׁ אַחַר שֶׁנִּבְרָא מִתְקַיֵּים עַל יְדֵי אֵלּוּ שֶׁעַל יְדֵי הַדַּיָּנִין שֶׁדָּנִין בֵּין אִישׁ לְחֲבֵירוֹ הָעוֹלָם קַיָּים כִּי אִלְמָלֵא הַדִּין כָּל דְּאַלִּים גָּבַר וְכֵן הָאֱמֶת כְּמוֹ שֶׁאָמְרוּ [עי׳ שבת קד.] שֶׁקֶר אֵין לוֹ רַגְלַיִם אַבָּל הָאֱמֶת הוּא יָסוֹד וּמַעֲמָד גָּדוֹל לְכָל הַדְּבָרִים וְכֵן הַשָּׁלוֹם כְּמוֹ שֶׁאָמְרוּ [אבות פ״ג] הֱוֵי מִתְפַּלֵּל בִּשְׁלוֹמָהּ שֶׁל מַלְכוּת שֶׁאִלְמָלֵא מוֹרָא מַלְכוּת אִישׁ אֶת רֵעֵהוּ חַיִּים בָּלְעוּ ע״כ:

[3] *See, e.g.*, Meir Soloveichik, *et al.*, *Proclaim Liberty Throughout the Land: The Hebrew Bible in the United States: A Sourcebook* (2019).

Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel says: On three things is the world established: on judgment, on truth, and on peace. Rabbeinu Yonah z"l explains: The explanation cannot be that "because of these three things the world was created," because the beginning of the chapter said that on three things does the world stand, and they are not those listed here. . . Here [Pirkei Avos] states, "...the world is established." This means that, after the world was created, it is preserved through these things — that through judges who judge between people does the world continue. Because, were it not for the enforcement of law, whoever is stronger would prevail in a dispute. And, similarly, truth [is essential], like it says in Shabbos 104a, that lies have no legs [to stand on] but truth is the foundation and it is a great pillar for all things. And, similarly, peace [is essential], as [our Sages] say in [Pirkei Avos 3:2]: One should pray for the peace of the government, for were it not for the fear of government, people would swallow each other alive.

The *Tur* is not engaging in mere political philosophy. As the *Tur* further elaborates, our tradition teaches that a judge who does his or her best to issue a correct ruling is elevated into partnership with Hashem Himself:

וְזֶהוּ כַּוָּנַת רַבּוֹתֵינוּ ז״ל בְּאָמְרָם כָּל הַדָּן דִּין אֱמֶת לְאַמִּתּוֹ כְּאִילוּ נַעֲשָׂה שׁוּתָּף לְהקב״ה בְּמַעֲשֶׂה בְּרֵאשִׁית כִּי הקב״ה בָּרָא הָעוֹלָם לִהְיוֹת קַיָּים ...

And this is the intention of our sages, z"l, when they say, "All who judge a judgment truthfully, it's as if he is a partner with God in the creation of the world," because God created the world to continue[.]

The Tur then catalogs many of the Torah's exhortations regarding justice and its implementation:

וּבְכַמָּה מְקוֹמוֹת הִזְהִיר עָלֵינוּ ע״י מֹשֶׁה רַבֵּינוּ עָלָיו הַשָּׁלוֹם [דברים א] לֹא תַכִּירוּ פָּנִים בַּמִּשְׁפָּט לֹא תָגוּרוּ מִפְּנֵי אִישׁ כִּי הַמִּשְׁפָּט לָאֱלֹקִים הוּא וְעוֹד הִזְהִיר עָלֵינוּ בְּעַשֶׂה [ויקרא יט] בְּצֶדֶק תִּשְׁפּוֹט עֲמִיתֶךָ [דברים א] וְשָׁפְטוּ אֶת הָעָם מִשְׁפַּט צֶדֶק וְצִוָּה לְמַנּוֹת שׁוֹפְטִים בְּכָל הַמְּקוֹמוֹת דִּכְתִיב [דברים טז] שֹׁפְטִים וְשֹׁטְרִים תִּתֶּן לְךָ בְּכָל שְׁעָרֶיךָ...

And in several places, Moshe, peace be upon him, cautioned us [in a prohibition] [Devarim 1]: "You shall not show partiality in judgment . . . nor shall you fear any litigant, for judgment belongs to God." And he further warned us in a positive commandment [Vayikra 19]: "You shall judge your fellow with justice." And [Devarim 1]: "Judge righteously." And he commanded [us] to appoint judges in all places, as it is written [Devarim 16]: "You shall appoint judges and officers for all your gates."

Lest anyone think these *halachos* are directed only to *Bnei Yisrael* living under a halachic system, the *Minchas Chinuch* (415:1) concludes that some of these *dinim* apply with equal force to non-Jews (the Noahide requirement to establish laws and a judicial system), and seemingly to a Jewish judge within a Noahide system.[4]

[4] Not surprisingly, United States law is consistent with those Biblical rules. *See* M. Solomson & T. Fortgang, *'Social' Justice Is Injustice*, Wall Street Journal (Nov. 7, 2023) (explaining that the judicial oath of office "come[s] from the Bible and reflect[s] a key principle of justice in the American tradition, shaped by our Judeo-Christian heritage: Justice

* * * *

Since October 7, 2023, my extracurricular work has been focused on doing what I can within the bounds of judicial ethics to publicly oppose campus antisemitism and anti-Americanism and, via The Tikvah Legal Fellowship, mentor future lawyers committed to America, Judaism, and the values and ideals of Western Civilization.

To those ends, I helped organize — along with three other Jewish federal judges — an educational trip to Israel for federal judges in March of 2024. Sponsored by the World Jewish Congress, our group consisted of an even number of Jewish and non-Jewish judges, including a few jurists reported to be on President Trump's shortlist for the Supreme Court. It was a life-changing trip that I deeply wish had been unnecessary.

We met with many senior Israeli officials, including the Speaker of the Knesset, members of the Supreme Court, and high-ranking IDF generals and lawyers. The most impactful part of the trip, not surprisingly, was our visit to Kibbutz Be'eri to bear witness to the atrocities committed there. We met with residents, were given a tour by a young *chayelet* who lost nearly a half-dozen relatives on the kibbutz, and viewed the damage while it was still relatively raw. The most gut-wrenching part of our trip, however, was when we were asked to watch the 47-minute video the IDF assembled of the Hamas attacks. All of us agreed to do so. The footage, taken from Hamas Go-Pro cameras and cell phones, victim cell phones, and security cameras, still has not been released to the general public. We were required to lock up our cellphones outside the viewing room. The IDF chose not to publicly release the video for several reasons. First, the IDF did not want to retraumatize victims — whether survivors or families of those murdered. Second, and more notably, the IDF did not want soldiers to enter battle angry. *Mi k'amcha Yisrael*. That was a righteous and wise call, as what we witnessed in that footage was literally nauseating, leaving everyone shaken and in tears; we were all speechless for hours.

I believe every judge from our trip has since spoken at law schools around the country about what we witnessed and learned, including the lengths to which the IDF goes to avoid civilian casualties. I have spoken to student groups at law schools including Harvard, Yale, Georgetown, and Catholic University. Once, a non-Jewish judge from our trip cancelled his planned remarks on another subject to appear with me to discuss Israel and antisemitism. When I informed him that we would be on the same campus on the same day, and that I would be speaking about our Israel trip, he suggested we present jointly — even though he had prepared a different speech. I repeat this story frequently because, living in the so-called Acela Corridor between DC and Boston, we can get the feeling that we're alone…that if we don't circle our wagons and take care of ourselves, nobody is going to stand up for us. I can testify that nothing could be further from the truth. Our non-Jewish friends are many, they are stalwart, and I am very grateful for them.

Similarly, the Orthodox Union ("OU") held its first-ever Attorneys Conference this past year, organized by our neighbor, and my esteemed *mechutan*, Mr. Nathan Diament, who leads the OU's

isn't about power" and "[w]hether a party is right or wrong in a dispute doesn't depend on that person's identity and social station").

public policy office in Washington, DC. The conference focused on antisemitism, an understandable choice on his part, particularly given the mess on college campuses these past few years. I was privileged to help Nathan organize a judicial panel discussion for the conference. One of his goals was to have a perspective from outside the Jewish community. It took just a single email to a non-Jewish judge from our Israel trip for him to enthusiastically agree to lend his time, considerable intellect, and impressive experience to the OU. His presence sent the critical message that there are many good people, often in important positions, who want to see antisemitism, in all its ugly forms, defeated.

I mentioned the Tikvah Legal Fellowship. It is a competitive, paid fellowship for Jewish law students (generally finishing their first year of law school). Sponsored by The Tikvah Fund, it is held in conjunction with the Blackstone Legal Fellowship — a prestigious program for committed Christians. Each summer, the Blackstone Fellowship kindly invites our Tikvah group to join them for a week of educational seminars, networking, and professional development. Many of the lecturers — for both Tikvah and Blackstone — are leading legal scholars and theologians. While Tikvah provides its fellows with their own programming, separate from Blackstone, we join the Blackstone Fellows for several of their seminars to gain a different perspective on some of the most significant legal and moral issues of the day.

A newer tradition is that Tikvah hosts a limited number of Blackstone students for dinner with our fellows. This year, three distinguished Jewish federal appellate judges joined us: Judge Steven Menashe (2d Cir.), Judge Daniel Bress (9th Cir.), and Judge Robert Luck (11th Cir.). Last summer, we were joined by Judge David Stras, of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit, whose grandparents were Holocaust survivors. He delivers a fascinating lecture about how their experiences shaped his view on the importance of our First Amendment (religious freedom and free speech).[5] Judge Stras had been on our Israel trip, and together we suggested to the Blackstone leadership the possibility of our speaking to their fellows about October 7th and our trip. Blackstone enthusiastically accepted our offer.

One of the Blackstone Fellows seated next to me at dinner — an earnest young man from the middle of the country — peppered me with respectful questions about Judaism. He knew very little about Jewish practice and was eager to learn. He told me that he was looking forward to our after-dinner presentation about Israel and October 7th, but wanted to know if it would be emotional. I told him that the answer would likely depend on how much he would identify with the victims. I warned him that there would be slides of a kibbutz and other areas devastated by Gazan terrorists, and that he would get a glimpse into the death and destruction of October 7th.

I expected our presentation might move *some* people in the audience, but I was not prepared for the intense result: our Tikvah Fellows reported that a significant percentage of their Blackstone peers were in tears. The young man seated next to me at dinner rose to the microphone to ask a question and was so emotional that he had difficulty getting his question out. The sympathy the Blackstone Fellows and staff expressed to us was beyond our expectations. That sort of emotional

[5] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wNedRqvHoF4 ("What My Grandparents' Experiences in the Holocaust Taught me about the First Amendment").

response cannot be faked, nor can it be attributed to eschatological views about the Messiah (and it's not like our disagreement on such issues is a secret). I am grateful to the Blackstone Fellowship for welcoming Tikvah students annually and for standing strong for the traditional American values that made our country a welcome destination for generations of weary Jews fleeing persecution. I do my best to hire both Blackstone and Tikvah Fellows as law clerks — they're brilliant and make me optimistic about the future.

A final note about being a Jewish federal judge in 2025: On *erev Pesach*, I received word from the President's Staff Secretary, Mr. Will Scharf, that the President had appointed me Chief Judge of the U.S. Court of Federal Claims, on which I have served as a judge since 2020. The Staff Secretary position is *way* more important than it may sound to those unfamiliar with White House operations. A highly accomplished attorney with degrees from both Princeton and Harvard, Mr. Scharf is a senior advisor to the President; nothing crosses the President's desk that Mr. Scharf or his team hasn't thoroughly reviewed. (Now-Justice Brett Kavanaugh served as Staff Secretary for President George W. Bush.) The point of this long windup is to contextualize the last part of Mr. Scharf's text message to me: "Have a good Shabbos and a *chag sameach*!"

My father once told me that his grandfather in Hartford, CT, would cross a street rather than walk past a police officer; he feared uniformed officials because of the way Russian or Lithuanian officers had treated Jews in the Old Country during his youth. What a marked contrast to our life's experience in America! I often wonder what he (or my grandparents) would think about my having been twice-appointed by the President of the United States — or about my chambers overlooking the White House, the Washington Monument, and the Potomac River. But, even more than that, I think they would have been moved by Mr. Scharf's text message. Who could have imagined, following the Holocaust — when the Torah-observant world had been decimated — that one day, the President of the United States would have an observant Jew reporting directly to him as Staff Secretary, who would in turn wish an observant judge "a good Shabbos and a *chag sameach*!" We are truly blessed to be Americans.

* * * *

The ideal of justice is so central to Judaism that it appears in perhaps the most famous summary of Hashem's expectations of us, as articulated by the prophet *Micha* (6:8):

> הִגִּיד לְךָ אָדָם מַה טּוֹב וּמָה ה׳ דּוֹרֵשׁ מִמְּךָ **כִּי אִם עֲשׂוֹת מִשְׁפָּט** וְאַהֲבַת חֶסֶד וְהַצְנֵעַ לֶכֶת עִם אֱלֹקֶיךָ׃
>
> *You have been told, O mortal, what is good, and what God requires of you: **Only to do justice**; and to love goodness; and to walk modestly with your God.*

Every year when we approach Rosh HaShanah — our annual *Yom HaDin* (מש׳ ראש השנה א׳׃ב׳) — I have the same question: What does it mean for Hashem to judge us or to do justice?

For humans, judging quite literally entails the exercise of judgment — which Merriam-Webster defines as "the process of forming an opinion or evaluation by discerning and comparing." By definition, exercising judgment is fundamentally different from solving a math or physics problem.

An equation has an objectively verifiable correct answer; a legal dispute does not. For example, in a bench trial — that is, a case without a jury — the judge must hear competing witness testimony and decide the facts; the judge must resolve debated legal issues; and the judge must apply the law to the facts. Each step requires judgment — "an opinion or evaluation." Different (reasonable) jurists hearing the same testimony, reviewing the same documents, and analyzing the same precedent, may reach different conclusions and yet be able to justify them with reasoned analysis.[6]

But it is axiomatic that Hashem does not suffer from such human limitations. He is not missing any of the facts, does not need to select among competing narratives, and cannot be persuaded by emotional appeals, as might a judge or jury. He cannot be *dan l'kaf zechus* (give the benefit of the doubt) because He knows *the* answer. He doesn't need our commitments, our good deeds, or our prayers. He is not like a human ruler who must, at least at times, be responsive to citizen demands. In short, Hashem is not an ATM that dispenses what we want when we recite formulaic incantations as if we're engaged in some sort of magic.

We all know the *beracha* that we make upon hearing bad tidings (like a death) or seeing a destroyed Jewish town: *Baruch Dayan HaEmes*. A similar (but much lengthier) *beracha* is recited upon seeing Jewish graves:

> הָרוֹאֶה קִבְרֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מְבָרֵךְ בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹקֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר יָצַר אֶתְכֶם בַּדִּין
> וְזָן אֶתְכֶם בַּדִּין וְכִלְכֵּל אֶתְכֶם בְּדִין וְהֵמִית אֶתְכֶם בַּדִּין וְהוּא עָתִיד לְהָקִים אֶתְכֶם
> בַּדִּין לְחַיֵּי הָעוֹלָם הַבָּא בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' מְחַיֵּה הַמֵּתִים׃
>
> *A person who sees Jewish graves should recite the blessing: "Blessed are You, God, our Lord, King of the universe, who created you with justice, judged you with justice, sustained you with justice, took your lives with justice, and ultimately, will lift you up with justice to the life of the world to come. Blessed are You, God, who resurrects the dead." (Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Berachos 10:10, based on Berachos 58)*

These *berachos* collectively testify to our belief that Hashem's judgments are perfect. Even if the way He manages the world is too complex for our limited understanding, we nevertheless bless Hashem for both the good and the "bad" — because even the latter may only be characterized as such due to our limited perception. That is a difficult concept to truly internalize — I do not pretend to be able to do so — but it is what the Torah instructs (*Mishna Berachos* 9:5):

> חַיָּב אָדָם לְבָרֵךְ עַל הָרָעָה כְּשֵׁם שֶׁהוּא מְבָרֵךְ עַל הַטּוֹבָה, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (דברים ו) וְאָהַבְתָּ
> אֵת ה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ בְּכָל לְבָבְךָ וּבְכָל נַפְשְׁךָ וּבְכָל מְאֹדֶךָ.

[6] Notably, outside of legal proceedings, we are enjoined to be דן לכף זכות. We translate that phrase "to judge others favorably" or to give our neighbor "the benefit of the doubt." Humans can do that, however, precisely because we function exclusively in a world of uncertainty and doubt. We rarely have all the facts, we certainly do not have perfect clarity regarding another's mental state, and the legal lens with which we are to assess the facts may itself be blurry. We do not have an אספקלריא המאירה. And so we must literally refrain from reaching a definitive judgment (if it will be a negative one).

> *One is obligated to recite a blessing for the bad that befalls him just as he recites a blessing for the good that befalls him, as it is stated: "And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might." (Devarim 6:5)*

Now, to be sure, that line of thinking may lead to feelings of futility, particularly on Rosh HaShanah. R. Yosef Albo, in his *Sefer HaIkkarim* (published in 1425), describes the lurking theological trap as follows (4:18):

> *The reason which leads men to doubt the efficacy of prayer is the same as that which leads them to deny God's knowledge. Their argument is as follows: Either God has determined that a given person shall receive a given benefit, or He has not so determined. If He has determined, there is no need of prayer; and if He has not determined, how can prayer avail to change God's will that He should now determine to benefit the person, when He had not so determined before? For God does not change from a state of willing to a state of not willing, or vice versa. For this reason, they say that right conduct is of no avail for receiving a good from God. And similarly they say that prayer does not avail to enable one to receive a benefit, or to be saved from an evil which has been decreed against him.*

The powerful answer *Sefer HaIkkarim* provides to that challenge is that prayer and *teshuva* (repentance) can *literally* change someone into a new person, thereby rendering an adverse judgment inapplicable. According to *Sefer HaIkkarim*, this answers the objection that Hashem's absolute perfection does not permit an alteration of His judgment:

> *As for the objection that the divine will cannot be changed by prayer, the answer is that the divine will in the first place is that the decree should be realized [only] if the person in question continues in the same state, and that the decree should be changed if the person's state changes.*

So, whatever it means for Hashem to judge us, we have the ability through our actions and repentance to avoid an adverse judgment. We can see a hint to that idea insofar as להתפלל (to pray) is reflexive — resulting in the grammatical observation that prayer is thus supposed to act on and change oneself, just as *Sefer HaIkkarim* explains. But what I imagine is less well known is that the root word of pray — פלל — means, literally, to judge.[7] So, when we pray, we are *not* supposed to be merely *asking* Hashem for things (be it forgiveness or something else); but rather we must be actively engaged in thorough self-judgment so that we can become new people. And that means *not* throwing up our hands and declaring "equipoise." Instead, like any good judge — as Judge Allegra taught me — we must do the hard work to get as close as humanly possible to the right answer. On Rosh HaShanah, the case is about us.

In judging ourselves, we must sift through the facts of the past year; ask ourselves whether we have lived up to Hashem's expectations; clarify where we fell short (or where we did well); and

[7] *See, e.g., Sefer HaShorashim* (פלל); *Klein Dictionary* (defining פלל as "to judge, arbitrate").

contemplate to whom among our friends, neighbors, and family members we may owe recompense. We should also probably strategize about how we might avoid the same "legal problems" in the coming year. And we must do all this while recognizing that we can delude ourselves, and possibly our family and friends, but we cannot fool the דַּיָּן הָאֱמֶת — the True Judge.

This Rosh HaShanah, may we all merit to engage in productive self-judgment, change for the better, commit to increase justice in this world, and ultimately be worthy of a favorable verdict in the Heavenly Court.

The Hon. Matthew H. Solomson was appointed to the U.S. Court of Federal Claims by President Trump, following Senate confirmation in January 2020. The President designated him as Chief Judge of the court in April 2025. Chief Judge Solomson is an active member of the Kollel L'Horaah (Yadin Yadin) at RIETS and is Dean of the Tikvah Legal Fellowship.

Cowboys and Shul Presidents: Why You May Not Want Your Baby to Grow Up to Be One — But Why I'm Grateful I Did

Mr. Daniel Chefitz

Willie Nelson famously sang, *"Mamas, don't let your babies grow up to be cowboys."* Some might say the same about shul presidents. Long hours, endless complaints, impossible expectations. It's a job that few fully understand, yet many are quick to critique.

Most congregants know what a treasurer does (balance budgets), what a youth director handles (kids and teens), or what a *gabbai* ensures (that the *minyan* runs smoothly). But the role of president? That's often more elusive. It's not just about making witty announcements from the *bimah*. A good shul president becomes a bridge between the community and the mission, navigating every facet of the shul's operation while staying grounded in its spiritual goals.

Yes, it's demanding. But it's also one of the most meaningful roles I've ever taken on.

Every shul president brings their own background and baggage to the job. For me, shul leadership runs in the family — my grandfather, father, father-in-law, and brother all served as presidents of Boston-area shuls. Candidly, I never aspired to follow in their footsteps. That changed when I met Rabbi Yosef Singer and walked through the doors of Young Israel of Potomac.

MY PATH FROM BOSTON TO POTOMAC (VIA CHICAGO AND BEYOND)

I was born in Boston and raised in Brookline, the heart of the city's Jewish life. Our family davened at the Maimonides School *minyan*, a modest *kehilla* led by none other than Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zt"l* — the Rav. As a teenager, I didn't grasp the magnitude of his presence. To me, he was simply our family's rabbi.

Despite its small size, the Maimonides *minyan* was spiritually rich. The Rav led without a board or a president. I learned from that experience the value of dignified davening, the importance of rabbinic leadership, and how a small, respectful *minyan* could carry the weight of greatness.

After our wedding, my wife and I moved to Chicago and joined a young, vibrant shul in West Rogers Park. That was my first exposure to shul governance — and, inevitably, to shul politics. The shul later debated a merger with a larger congregation that would become Orthodox and join the OU after the merger. While we weren't involved in the negotiations, I remember how high the stakes felt. Unfortunately, a consensus was never reached, and half our shul — including the Rabbi — joined the larger shul, which became Orthodox, while the remainder stayed at the original shul. I remember the move very well. The very first Shabbos at the new shul featured a *bris*: our first son's. I gained a new appreciation for the pressure that presidents and boards face, especially in moments of communal transition and division.

We moved again — to Skokie, then Newton, MA — joining larger shuls in both communities, where it was easy to stay anonymous. We had our friends, but never really knew the full shul community. I never thought to seek out a volunteer or leadership position at either shul. And that suited me just fine at the time.

FINDING MY PLACE AT YOUNG ISRAEL OF POTOMAC

Before we moved there more than 20 years ago, I had never even heard of Potomac. I had heard of Silver Spring, having stayed there twice for Shabbat in the 1980s when I attended the Hebrew Academy of Greater Washington (now Berman) high school basketball tournaments as part of the visiting team from Boston. Once in Potomac, I naturally gravitated to Beth Sholom, the larger shul in town (and I was friends with their then-assistant rabbi, Rabbi Elly Krimsky, a fellow Bostonian). But at some point, we decided to give Young Israel a try — and that changed everything.

From the start, it reminded me of the Maimonides *minyan*: small, warm, and spiritually alive. At Young Israel, there's no room for spectators. Everyone participates. And Rabbi and Rebbetzin Singer made us feel like family.

I recall a particular *drasha* from Rabbi Singer early on that felt like he was speaking directly to me. (I've since learned that this is one of his superpowers — making everyone feel that way.) He quoted from *Yekum Purkan*, the prayer recited on Shabbat mornings:

May Hashem bless those who unite to form synagogues…
and all who occupy themselves with the needs of the community.

And in return?

May Hashem remove illness from them, forgive their sins,
and send blessing and success to all the work of their hands.

That message stuck with me. Rabbi Singer encouraged each of us to contribute whatever talents we had. If you can *lein*, volunteer to read an *aliyah*. Start with one. Just begin. That message eventually nudged me out of anonymity and into service.

Another powerful aspect of Young Israel was its diversity. For the first time, I found myself among many *Baalei Teshuva*. My wife and I are "FFBs" — *frum* from birth — but hearing about others' spiritual journeys inspired us to examine our own. Their passion and growth rekindled something in us that had become routine. We realized, maybe for the first time in a while, that everyone — no matter how observant — has room to grow.

ON THE JOB: WHAT IT'S REALLY LIKE TO BE SHUL PRESIDENT

Eventually, I joined the board. I served in many roles, including *gabbai*, treasurer, and president. I even learned to *lein Megillat Esther*, helped manage the shul website, and volunteered when needed to read the Torah. Twenty years earlier, I would not have believed it.

Young Israel of Potomac is a collegial place. We don't do contested elections. Our annual meeting is a *Melaveh Malka*-slash-game night: not a battleground. Presidents work closely with the Rabbi and have input on forming the board. When choosing board members, I looked for four qualities:

1. A cross-section of the membership;
2. A willingness to work hard;
3. Passion for our mission;
4. The ability to build consensus.

Consensus is key. I took time to speak with former presidents and read every set of board minutes from the shul's founding. I never made big decisions without consulting Rabbi Singer, who, aside from being our Rav, has deep leadership experience — and, I'm told, a certain rabbinical organization presidency of his own.

Each board meeting begins with a *Dvar Torah*. That reminder — *that this is holy work* — sets the tone. While the president oversees operations, finances, youth programming, and physical maintenance, ritual matters are left to the Rabbi and *gabbai*.

In today's world, security has also become a core function. From hiring police to applying for DHS grants, it requires time, skill, and diligence. We're fortunate to have a true *tzaddik* in our community who devotes over 100 hours each year just to grant work — quietly protecting not just our shul, but many others in the D.C. area.

THE GREATEST REWARD

So what's the best part of being a shul president? It's not just knowing the HVAC system, the soda preferences (it's Pepsi, by the way), or how many tissues we have in stock. And it's not even the satisfaction of seeing a successful youth program or a well-run board.

The greatest gift is the relationship you build with your rabbi.

During my term, Rabbi Singer and I worked as partners. Our mutual respect and shared goals formed the foundation of a lasting friendship. The experience didn't just make me a better president. It made me a better person.

FINAL THOUGHTS: A JOB WORTH DOING

Being a shul president isn't for the faint of heart. It takes time, energy, humility, and patience. But it's also deeply rewarding.

You help build and sustain the spiritual heartbeat of your community. You may forge friendships — including with your rabbi — that will shape your life for years. And you discover what it means to serve with purpose.

Cowboys ride off into the sunset. Shul presidents, if they're lucky, leave a legacy of connection, continuity, and community.

Daniel Chefitz *is currently the gabbai, treasurer, and "candy man" at Young Israel of Potomac, having previously served as its president. He is a partner at the law firm of Morgan Lewis & Bockius, helping businesses ring-fence legacy liabilities. Daniel's legendary cholent and meat board creations can be followed on Instagram at #MeatZayde.*

There is No Greater Feeling than Being the Former President of a Shul

Dr. Saul Newman
Associate Dean for Undergraduate Education
School of Public Affairs, American University
Co-Chair, KMS Rabbinic Search Committee, 2014–2015
President, Kemp Mill Synagogue, 2018–2019

I daven at the *Hashkamah Minyan* on Shabbat morning at Kemp Mill Synagogue. While KMS is a vibrant shul that may have over eight hundred attendees on a Shabbat morning at five separate *minyanim*, the *Hashkamah Minyan* is relatively small. Of the thirty to forty people who daven there, sometimes as many as eight are former KMS presidents. This represents nearly half of all those who have been president of KMS. It is not by accident that *Hashkamah* is the "assisted-living facility" for former KMS presidents. We appreciate the solitude.

There is no greater feeling than being the *former* president of a shul. There are so many reasons why I say this. You can enjoy an immense sense of satisfaction that you did the best you could as a lay leader to promote the growth, spirituality, and religious experiences of the community you love and call home. You can cherish very fond memories of working closely with the Rabbi and learning from him. In my case, I can think of no greater opportunity than working closely with Rabbi Weinberg, who is as wonderful in private as he is in public. I got to work with an incredible group of volunteers who share a passion for KMS. I was so fortunate to work with an amazing Executive Committee, board, and a "kitchen cabinet" I spoke with daily, who worked around the clock and directed me in how to navigate the complexities of KMS. Hopefully, all of us agreed that our efforts created generational continuity, as younger leaders stepped forward to take our shul to the next level.

While these successes bring a sense of joy, the end of your term brings a sense of relief that you can return to your family and career full-time and not have to put in many hours each day on shul business. You can also interact with your friends and fellow congregants without having to be on guard for both joking and serious criticisms about the shul. You don't have to second guess whether your fundraising appeal to a friend may weaken your valued friendship. You don't have to stay up at night thinking about the shul, only to be distracted by a late night e-mail from a disgruntled congregant whose unfiltered criticisms give you pause. However, all of these "negatives" are outweighed by the joy of connecting with all members and the sense of satisfaction from serving the community you love.

In terms of personal growth, being president makes you go to shul more frequently, participate in more shul events, and attend more *shiurim*. The Torah you learn, the members you meet, and the people with whom you work on a daily basis leave you profoundly richer. Listening to the many members who learned *Daf Yomi* inspired me to learn *Daf Yomi* myself — something I might

not have done if I had not spent time as shul president. Every day I learn the *Daf*, I am grateful for the opportunity I had.

HAVING A VISION AND GOALS

When I became president, I felt that our shul was at an inflection point. KMS was started by an amazing "founding generation," together with Rabbi Bieler, who shared a special vision for the shul and saw it grow rapidly over 25 years. As a result, KMS had unique traditions that were not shared by many other Orthodox shuls: a people's pulpit speaking rotation on Shabbat, a women's *tefillah* group that meets monthly in KMS, and an unwritten rule that we don't speak about politics from the pulpit. Many members told me that they had moved to Kemp Mill, not for their jobs, but for KMS.

But 25 years on, new generations outnumbered the founding generation, and a new rabbi had arrived. Both shared the original KMS vision, but also wanted to use their own strengths to build on that foundation in new ways. My job was, first and foremost, to create the "space" for Rabbi Weinberg to use his amazing gifts to take KMS in new and exciting directions. This meant helping him and the community navigate positive change while respecting the foundations of KMS that we all cherish.

A second focus was putting KMS on a long-term financial footing that would allow us to grow shul staffing as well as programming. KMS definitely needed to raise more money for programming projects as well as for infrastructure. I was pleased that we were able to raise funds through membership growth, changed dues structures, and special appeals that created a financial cushion for the shul — all of which has allowed for expanded programming and a larger staff.

This was not without its challenges. It is hard to ask friends to donate larger sums of money given the high costs of our Modern Orthodox lifestyle. I was occasionally accused of "monetizing KMS" — but, in retrospect, that was a small price to pay (pun intended) to create an even more vibrant shul.

During its first 25 years, KMS was a volunteer-driven shul. KMS members had done an incredible job organizing shul programming. The shul's office staff had been indispensable in these efforts, often playing a supporting role. This volunteer-led system created a unique esprit de corps and sense of community, but it also resulted in volunteer burnout and high rates of turnover that undermined institutional memory. Every new volunteer had to reinvent the wheel when organizing programs.

With newly raised funds, we created a larger, professionalized, and long-term staff that could provide institutional memory and organizational knowledge, thus lessening the burden on member volunteers. This was always a delicate balance because you want members to have a sense of shul ownership and not just be customers.

One peculiar issue on which I spent more time than I probably should have was Shabbat announcements. At the time, the president would make announcements after the Rabbi's *derasha*. Rabbi Weinberg does an incredible job of creating a sense of community through his *derasha*; I saw the announcements as a way of building on that sense of belonging by bringing the community together through humor. I tried to make my announcements both heartfelt and funny. I know some members enjoyed them, while some may have found them annoying. I do know that, after I finished my presidency, Rabbi Weinberg moved the announcements to before his sermon. This seems a reasonable decision, given that the Rabbi is trying to leave the membership with a powerful religious message.

NOBODY EXPECTS THE PRESIDENTIAL INQUISITIONS

Beyond all of this were, of course, the daily meetings, event organizing, employee and member relations issues, complaints, and crises. These issues were probably the most time-consuming. I'll give you several examples.

Every year during Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, I would get lots of unsolicited opinions about KMS' toilet paper, both from a quality perspective and from a halachic standpoint. I am told by other presidents that this theme was a common one during the Yamim Noraim — although not nearly as frequent as room temperature (the women are cold and the men are hot) and seat assignment complaints. Using the awesome power of the presidency, I made a unilateral decision to switch to more expensive toilet paper — and those complaints ceased.

Two more critical crises involved whether members could bring guns to shul and whether members needed to be vaccinated against childhood diseases in order to attend shul.

On October 27, 2018, an extremist attacked Tree of Life Synagogue in the Squirrel Hill neighborhood of Pittsburgh. The perpetrator murdered eleven people and wounded six, in the deadliest attack on a local Jewish community in American history. We immediately received requests from members to carry guns to shul, and we needed to develop a policy.

After a number of meetings, the Executive Committee adopted a course of action that we believed enhanced the security of the community

In September 2019, a measles outbreak occurred among unvaccinated ultra-Orthodox Jews in Rockland County, NY. After several meetings, we developed a policy requiring vaccination for childhood diseases as a prerequisite for attending KMS.

I am so grateful to my successor, Larry Lerman. Only three months after he took over, Larry, Rabbi Weinberg, and the board had to deal with the COVID pandemic, revisiting the vaccination issue

with an intensity none of us could have ever imagined. Coincidentally, six months before the COVID outbreak, we had launched a campaign to purchase tents to address the space problem at KMS — under the slogan "Make KMS More In-Tents (Intense)." Once again, none of us knew that the pandemic would result in the whole shul moving into tents.

HOW TO MERGE YOUR TWO DAY JOBS

In my day job, I am an academic. I am grateful that social science has deepened my understanding of my own religion. My academic research focuses primarily on conflicting nationalisms around the world. In many instances, nationalist conflicts are bound up in religious differences, giving me familiarity with theories of religious identity and involvement.

There is a strong and enduring relationship between levels of economic development and levels of religious belief and practice. Starting with the works of Emile Durkheim, there has been a consistent stream of academic arguments that scientific advancement, the division of labor, and economic modernization all will result in increasing secularization.

One of the great outliers to the assumption that economic modernization breeds secularization has been the United States. When compared with all other countries at a similar level of economic development, the United States is more religious by a vast amount across all measures including belief in G-d; belief in heaven and hell; and attendance at a house of worship (Norris & Inglehart, 2011) (Putnam & Campbell, 2010).

There are several explanations for this, including our status as an immigrant society. Immigrants seek out their "native" religion in their new country as a way of accessing institutional resources, knowledge of their new environment, and social supports from people who share a common lived experience, culture, and language.

But the most compelling argument for me is the role of the "religious marketplace" in the United States (Stark & Bainbridge, 1987) (Finke & Starke, 2005). Economically advanced societies usually exist within states that have a recognized state religion. Scholars argue that state religions often become institutionally and bureaucratically sclerotic and, as a result, fail to attract and inspire believers. However, the separation of Church and State, coupled with freedom of religion, creates an unregulated market where religious entrepreneurs can promote religious innovations that effectively attract religious customers. The variety of religious beliefs and organizations in the United States, as well as their constant innovation, are the result of the open marketplace for religion.

I took the concept of the religious marketplace to heart. My job was to get more people to come to shul and participate in davening and events, to get more people to become dues-paying and donating members. I was totally committed to creating an environment and developing programs that would accomplish those goals. The phrase I used was that we needed to create "demographically specific portals of entry" into KMS. Once members were in the door, I joyously left it to our amazing Rabbi to bring G-d, Torah, and spirituality into their lives. Nobody can do

that better than Rabbi Weinberg. As KMS continues to grow under subsequent presidents and Rabbi Weinberg's leadership, I *schep nachas*.

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Certifying the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum Dinner

Rabbi Zvi Holland
Rabbinic Coordinator, Capitol K

This year's United States Holocaust Memorial Museum National Tribute Dinner in Washington, D.C., held in memory of the six million and in honor of the survivors, carried not only historical and emotional weight — but also halachic significance. For the first time in its history, this national gala, hosting over one thousand dignitaries, survivors, donors, and diplomats, was fully kosher-certified.

The momentous decision to make the dinner kosher was finalized mere weeks before the event, launching a whirlwind of logistical, spiritual, and halachic activity that culminated in a profound *Kiddush Hashem*. The dinner was held right after Pesach, which made the timing very tight for presenting and preparing a kosher event on time and with professionalism.

The Rabbinical Council of Greater Washington, together with a select group of veteran *kashrus* professionals and dedicated *mashgichim*, mobilized to address a question few kashrus teams face: How do you *kasher* and maintain halachic control over a massive, high-end, catering infrastructure with less than 72 hours to prepare from the end of Pesach to the dinner?

THE CALL THAT STARTED IT ALL

The phone call came just before noon during the week before Pesach: "Can you make the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum Dinner kosher this year?" The event was scheduled for right after Pesach. The team at the Rabbinical Council paused, blinked, and responded with a mix of instinctive resolve and appropriate concern.

It wasn't a theoretical question. It meant turning a completely non-kosher event into one that would meet the standards of halachic observance, under full supervision, in a venue that had never hosted such a meal before.

The host caterer — one of the most prominent names in Washington's high-end hospitality scene — was more than willing to comply and to partner with one of our local Capitol K Kosher-certified caterers for food prep. But the plates, flatware, and warming and transport equipment were not kosher (yet) and their staff was generally unfamiliar with the protocols of kosher service. They had never *kashered* a piece of equipment, let alone fifty stainless steel hot boxes, dozens of speed racks, and hundreds of pieces of smallware. And yet, the desire from all sides to honor Holocaust survivors and attendees with a meal that would reflect Jewish sacred tradition moved everyone to say: "Let's make it happen!"

MOBILIZING THE MASHGICHIM

After making the commitment to perform, plans were quietly put in place. During the week before Pesach, the Rabbinical Council secured the services of over a dozen *mashgichim* — some local, some brought in from out of town due to other conflicting events. Coordinators worked across time zones — while also engaged at various Pesach venues — with halachic consultations taking place well into the night.

As soon as Pesach was over, a full team was on the way. The clock had started.

The first major task: ***kashering* the equipment**.

KASHERING ON A COMMUNAL SCALE

Halachically, *kashering* equipment used for non-kosher food involves rendering it temporarily unusable, cleaning it meticulously, and then subjecting it to high heat — dry or wet, depending on the manner in which it is used (*libun* or *hagalah*) — sufficient to remove any absorbed taste. This already-complex process becomes exponentially more difficult when dealing with:

- **50+ stainless steel hot boxes:** Tall, narrow, insulated cabinets used to keep plated food warm during transport
- **Speed racks:** Essential for prepping and staging in volume
- **Hundreds of utensils:** Each requiring individual attention

Every item had to be scrubbed, boiled, torched, or *kashered* with water, according to its material and use. The commissary didn't have space, so temporary *kashering* stations were constructed offsite using propane burners, industrial-sized wet steamers, and immersion setups.

Mashgichim worked in shifts, each with strict lists and photographic documentation to ensure no item was missed. Equipment that could not be *kashered* — such as items that could not be cleaned, china dinnerware, and a tremendous amount of flatware — were removed entirely and replaced with kosher-certified or brand-new equipment.

The *kashering* took almost a full day with six *mashgichim* working at an off-site location. Steam rose, prayers were murmured, and each boiling pot served as a quiet tribute to the sanctity of Jewish law.

THE HALACHIC SAFEGUARDS

The supervising rabbinic team instituted multiple levels of oversight:

- **Tagging and sealing:** Every *kashered* piece of equipment was labeled and sealed with tamper-evident tags.
- ***Hashgachah Temidis*:** At no point were the prep or staging areas left without certified *mashgichim* present to ensure that all elements of *kashrus* were followed.
- **Ingredient control:** Only pre-approved, pre-checked kosher ingredients were allowed. Fresh produce underwent checking for bugs. All foods were sealed, inspected, and logged.
- **Transport logistics:** Once the food was plated and boxed, hot boxes were sealed by *mashgichim* before being transported to the venue.

Each process was signed off by a supervising rabbi, and final sign-off by Capitol K senior rabbinic staff occurred on-site at the museum, before plating commenced.

A FLURRY OF FINAL PREP

The day of the event arrived. Dozens of staff began streaming into the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum's event space, transforming the grand reception hall into a seated formal dinner for over 1,000 guests. The museum, ever respectful of Jewish tradition, welcomed the *mashgichim* to oversee and finalize prep.

Each hot box was unsealed, each plate was inspected, and last-minute reheating was conducted with *mashgiach* presence. Behind the scenes, *mashgichim* double-checked the bar for *mevushal* wine; approved liquor, beer, mixers, and garnishes; and kosher serving utensils.

And then it happened.

KIDDUSH HASHEM, IN EVERY BITE

As guests found their seats, it was evident that great meaning was attached to the fact that this year's dinner was fully kosher-certified under the Rabbinical Council of Greater Washington.

For some, it was an emotional moment. Survivors and their families, many of whom had lived through times when being Jewish came at great cost, were now seated in the U.S. capital at a nationally significant event, eating a meal prepared according to *halacha* — with full acknowledgment and respect from the broader American public.

It wasn't just about the food. It was about: Dignity. Continuity. Memory.

REFLECTIONS: THE HALACHIC AND MORAL IMPERATIVE

The decision to take on this project was not made lightly. Halachic standards were never compromised, even under pressure. The team approached each challenge with a sense of *yiras Shamayim* and professional rigor.

We honor the memory of those lost by affirming the sacred in the present.

May this effort serve as a merit for the souls of the six million and a source of pride for *Klal Yisrael.*

A Seat at the Table, a Place in the Heart: *Hachnasas Orchim* for Singles in Our Community

Rabbi Hirsh and Mrs. Chayie Chinn

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS FROM LOCAL SINGLES

"It's been difficult to navigate my emotions as a divorced, single mother. The initial sense of shame was overwhelming; rare invitations for meals on Shabbos and *chagim* just added to the sense of not being 'good enough.' This had a domino effect, emotionally and spiritually: not only for me, but for my children. They grew up feeling excluded, are no longer observant, and are disconnected from *frum* people.

"Shabbos was the worst day of the week: a 25-hour nightmare, especially after the kids left for college and I was alone for all that time! I no longer felt welcome at shul — only shame and isolation. I questioned my spirituality and even considered speaking with a priest, thinking I might find my place elsewhere. In the end, I didn't follow through. While the Torah commands us to care for widows, why are people who are single for other reasons often forgotten? The result: a few hours of Netflix and a hot bath — making the hours pass without violating Shabbos 'too much.'

"Then things shifted: a few families began inviting me. The anxiety of going alone was daunting; I went — with feelings of being a 'mitzvah case' — but it beat sitting alone. There are homes where I now feel at home. I am not a misfit. I am a superwoman; people who don't see that are missing out.

"While some hosts invite singles just for the sake of the *mitzvah*, I still appreciate it. Their meals, songs, and conversations have supported my healing, helped me reconnect with Hashem, and made Shabbos and Yom Tov special again. These '*mitzvah*' invitations have grown into meaningful friendships; in turn, I help these families as well. I have been asked to care for children overnight, walk kids to the school bus, or substitute on Grandparents Day — and I am thrilled to reciprocate. Everyone has gained in love and connection.

"I'm so grateful to these hosts for all the work — not to mention the rising cost of groceries. I look forward to Shabbos and a seat at others' tables."

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"The best way to embrace those in our community who are not currently married is to welcome them into your circle as effortlessly as you do with their married counterparts. If you often invite friends for Shabbos meals, make sure you invite your single friends. If you 'show up' for friends in other ways, be intentional about 'showing up' in that way for your single friends.

"Single people don't have the built-in sense of belonging that marriage and family offer, so creating space in your home, family, and community for those who are not married is so impactful. Also, keep in mind that single people may feel very awkward being hosted by people they don't yet know."

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"As an Orthodox single, there's no way to fully describe the feeling of facing a Shabbos alone — knowing you're not going anywhere for a Shabbos meal. You feel invisible in the community.

"With HOKM meals, something has shifted. Instead of having to call around, hoping for an invitation, people are proactively included. It's become routine, a built-in part of Shabbos. You know you're welcome, you have a place to go, and you won't be the only single person at a table full of married couples. We can't always count on being invited to families' homes — but we can count on this. There's a sense of security in knowing we won't be alone. The meals create opportunities to socialize and connect. It feels like a 'sub-family.' I've watched people change — become more open, more relaxed, more themselves. And we share something in common — even though we are different ages and come from different backgrounds, we've become friends. The couples who host us are *tzadikim*. I would still love to be invited by other families as well."

THE MITZVAH OF HACHNASAS ORCHIM

The first time we encounter the *mitzvah* of *hachnasas orchim* in the *Torah* is, of course, in *Parshas Vayeira*: three guests suddenly appear to Avraham Avinu as Hashem is visiting him after his *bris milah*. The *pasuk* says:

וַיֹּאמַר: אֲדֹנָי-י, אִם נָא מָצָאתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ, אַל נָא תַּעֲבֹר מֵעַל עַבְדֶּךָ.
My masters, if I have found favor in your eyes,
please do not bypass your servant. (*Bereishis* 18:3)

Rashi offers two explanations of the word אדנ-י. In Rashi's first interpretation, the word refers to the travelers; Avraham is asking the guests not to leave.

Rashi's second explanation reads:

דָּבָר אַחֵר - קֹדֶשׁ הוּא, וְהָיָה אוֹמֵר לְהקב״ה לְהַמְתִּין לוֹ
עַד שֶׁיָּרוּץ וְיַכְנִיס אֶת הָאוֹרְחִים.

In this case, "אדנ-י" refers to HaKadosh Baruch Hu: Avraham is addressing Hashem, asking Him to wait while he serves his guests. Would any of us ever consider saying, "Hang on Hashem: I'll be right back!?" Of course not!

The *Gemara* (*Shabbos* 127a) teaches that, from Avraham's actions, we learn an important principle:

גְּדוֹלָה הַכְנָסַת אוֹרְחִין מֵהַקְבָּלַת פְּנֵי הַשְּׁכִינָה.
The mitzvah of hachnasas orchim is greater than greeting Hashem.

The Meiri, commenting on this *Gemara*, says:

לְעוֹלָם יִשְׁתַּדֵּל אָדָם בְּהַכְנָסַת אוֹרְחִים, שֶׁאֵין לְךָ מִצְוָה גְּדוֹלָה הֵימֶנָּה.
A person should always make efforts for hachnasas orchim,
as there is no greater mitzvah.

Did Avraham know who these guests were? Did he know they were angels? Did he weigh the pros and cons of inviting them in? Did he think about whether they would mesh well with his family and other guests? The obvious answer to all is: No! He seized the opportunity and answered their needs.

In every community, on any Shabbos or Yom Tov, there are "angels" walking past our "tents" — sitting next to us in shul or milling around the social hall at *kiddush*. Those "angels" are unmarried men and women of any age, living alone, who spend Shabbos alone week after week.

It is not unheard of for single *Shomer Shabbos* people **in our very own community** to think about using their phones or computers on Shabbos, due to the struggle of being alone in a silent home without the connection and "noise" of phones and the internet. By nature, the Jewish community is primarily family-centric, which only adds to the sense of isolation and loneliness that many single people experience.

While it is true that many local families regularly host single people, and there are some local grassroots efforts regarding this matter (see below) — as a community, we have the ability and the responsibility to do better.

The benefits to the recipients of this extraordinary *mitzvah* are obvious. Here are a few of the great benefits for hosts and their families:

- First and foremost, merit for the performance of the *mitzvah* of *hachnasas orchim* — a component of the *mitzvah* of *chesed* — as well as the *mitzvos* of *gemilus chasadim* (acts of loving kindness), *ahavas Yisrael* (loving one's fellow Jew), emulating Hashem, and *nosei b'ol im chaveiro* (acting with empathy). While hosting friends and family is nice and surely should be done, doing so does not fulfill the *mitzvah* of *hachnasas orchim*.
- What method of educating our children could be more powerful than modeling the aforementioned foundational *middos*?
- When we regularly share what we have with others, we actively acknowledge that all that we have is a gift from the *Ribbono Shel Olam*. In the words of Rabbi Eliezer of Bartosa in *Pirkei Avos*:

תֵּן לוֹ מִשֶּׁלּוֹ, שֶׁאַתָּה וְשֶׁלְּךָ שֶׁלּוֹ.
Give Him from what is His, for you and whatever is yours are His. (3:7)

- Opening our homes provides a window onto the greater Jewish world: an opportunity to learn so much about the diverse people who make up *Klal Yisrael* and their experiences, as well as other communities (think: a Jewish travelogue).
- In the words of two families who regularly host:
    - "Hosting single individuals for meals has really enhanced Shabbos and Yom Tov for my family. It adds more meaning as well as excitement to our meals, which my children enjoy. Furthermore, through the meals, we have created relationships with some very kind and interesting people whom we otherwise would not have met. Some guests share interesting stories and others sit and read books to my children during or after the meal. It's a win-win situation!"
    - "We truly enjoy hosting various individuals in our home for Shabbos. It adds a special radiance to our meal and creates a beautiful Shabbos atmosphere. At the end of our meal, many of our guests thank us for having them — but really we thank them for enhancing our Shabbos in many ways."

LOCAL COMMUNITY-ORGANIZED INITIATIVES

There are individual families across the Greater Washington Jewish community who invite area singles regularly to join them at their Shabbos tables. In addition, there are broader, community-based efforts to coordinate and expand these activities.

HOKM (Hachnasas Orchim Kemp Mill) is an example of a grassroots community initiative. HOKM's key efforts include:

- connecting hosts with those requesting to be hosted for Shabbos and Yom Tov meals, using a WhatsApp group of over 110 host families;
- coordinating a rotation of ten families who warmly welcome singles into their homes each Shabbos for a shared *seudah* and a sense of belonging; (While these *seudos* are open to men and women of all ages, they are not intended as a *shidduch* event.)
- hosting a large Purim *seudah* or an occasional Shabbos *seudah*, in one of the local shuls; and
- occasionally setting up Shabbos meals and housing for guests visiting the area.

HOKM operates in Kemp Mill; other communities throughout Greater Washington have developed their own efforts to engage and support singles.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

[based upon feedback from local singles]

I would love to host local singles, but I think it will feel super awkward for someone I've never invited if I randomly reach out to them. How do I start?

The next time you see a single person at *kiddush* in shul, at the grocery store, on your block, or while waiting for your prescription at CVS, strike up a conversation. At the end of the conversation, ask if they are open to invitations for Shabbos meals. There is no need to apologize for not inviting them previously. If they say yes, you can invite them on the spot or follow up with a phone call or text within a day or two. In all probability, their appreciation for the invitation will override any awkward feelings about why you've decided to invite them now. Try to invite people who are not regularly being invited by others.

Reach out to your shul rabbi and *rebbetzin*. Ask them to make a suggestion or connection. They know you and can probably figure out who would be a good match for you.

Ask friends who already host singles to connect you with some of their guests.

Contact HOKM at hokminitiative@gmail.com. We would love to help.

I would love to host, but I'm exhausted at the end of the week and I'm worried about taking on too much.

לֹא עָלֶיךָ הַמְּלָאכָה לִגְמוֹר.

It is not your duty to finish the work. Start small: you don't have to host every Shabbos. Hosting just a few times a year is better than not hosting at all.

I can pretty much count on my kids misbehaving at some point during Shabbos meals. Should I be hosting?

Yes, that's fine. It's normal and to be expected that kids will misbehave. Guests like when families act naturally: it makes them feel more at home. Worse comes to worst, they will decline a future invitation if it's too much for them. Some families report that their kids behave better when guests are around: Try it!

How do I know if the guest(s) will be a good fit?

You probably won't know, and that's part of the beauty. Often, the most fabulous Shabbos meals are the ones with a mix of personalities and stories.

You might make a new friend! Each person has the potential to be a warm, caring, and trusted friend — whether married or single. While hosts may develop new friendships more naturally with another married couple due to our family-centered society, deep relationships with single people at the same stage of life are equally fulfilling and require no more effort. Inviting single people for Shabbos is one way to meet their need for a sense of belonging in the community, but it's not the only way: Try to connect just as you would with married people. Be mindful that, although the initial motivation to host may be rooted in *chesed*, no one wants to be a "*chesed* project." The invitation and experience should be genuine attempts at developing potential friendships.

I cook very basic Shabbos meals — nothing fancy, just one or two courses — and we serve on plastic dishes. Will guests judge me if I don't make a big "spread?"

Hosting company isn't about gourmet food or elaborate "spreads." It's about making others feel welcome, included, and cared for. A simple *seudah* shared with sincerity is more meaningful than a fancy one.

I'm worried about inviting someone I don't know anything about.

That makes sense. You may want to call a local *rav* or *rebbetzin* and ask about this potential guest.

What are some common hosting faux pas that I should avoid?

- Don't seat a single person at the end of the table with your young children.
- Don't ask personal questions about their job, family, dating, conversion, divorce, etc. As they get to know you, they may feel comfortable sharing that information — or not.
- Don't invite them just once and forget to invite them back again. That could feel very hurtful.
- Don't ask them to offer a *Dvar Torah* or lead *bentsching*, unless you are certain that they know how, so as not to embarrass them. (See *Sefer Chasidim, Siman* 312).
- Don't assume that single parents with children don't want invitations.
- Try not to wait until Thursday or Friday (or Erev Yom Tov) to invite someone, lest it appear that they are an afterthought.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Consider including singles at your Shabbos or Yom Tov table. It will be a win-win for you, for your family, and for single people. Everyone will grow from the experience — and the rewards are immeasurable.

The ABCDs of Creating Caring Communities

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Special Assistant to the Executive Vice Presidents, Orthodox Union
Director of Kol Echad, Orthodox Union

"As a 20-something medical student, I was seated at the children's table at a wedding."

"I stopped going to shul because it's painful and lonely: sitting alone, walking back alone, and spending the long Shabbos day — alone."

"I wish I wouldn't feel like I'm expected to be the babysitter when I visit my family over Yom Tov. It's hard enough to be surrounded by all their children."

These are real quotes from real people who experience unimaginable pain. Some were taken from a study conducted by the Orthodox Union to better understand the experiences of single men and women; some from a study conducted to explore the experiences of divorcees. While there are gems of information in both studies (research.ou.org), the overall message — that the community needs to do more for these populations — is not something we need to learn from a study.

The OU established Kol Echad, a department which I have the honor of directing, to help communities focus their attention and energy on these populations. While other efforts need to be pitched, explained, and justified, I have never needed to explain to communal leaders around the country the need to do better for the single people in our midst. It is abundantly clear; the challenge is what can be done.

In conversations with communities, shuls, and individuals who excel at caring for this population, I have gleaned a number of best practices that all of us, professionals and lay people alike, can integrate into our lives. It is as easy, I've come to learn, as: A-B-C-D.

A – ACKNOWLEDGE

Two years ago, the rabbi of a large shul told me that the most meaningful step he took to better support this population was to ask his staff to print a spreadsheet of all who were single in his community. I recently bumped into him. He told me that he has not yet made any concrete changes in his shul, but having that paper on his desk reminds him, from time to time, to make an extra call before Shabbos or to think more broadly about whom he should invite for a Shabbos meal.

Does the leadership of each shul know how many single members attend their shul?

This is not only a question for shul leadership. Do all of us know how many single people sit near us in shul? Do we know how many single people live on our block?

Before we can bring about any meaningful change, it is critical that we open our eyes and become more aware of those around us.

Acknowledging also means communicating with members of this population that they are recognized. Before meeting with the leadership of one major Jewish community, our team collected data on the local shuls. We were shocked to learn that only one shul had special pricing for singles and single parents. Of course, if someone were to ask for a discount, they would receive it — but having a special price, whether it's for membership or for an event, conveys a powerful message that singles are seen.

B – BEFRIEND

A rabbi once told me that he received a call from a widowed woman who davened in a different shul, asking if he would be able to give her a call before every Shabbos. Apparently, it was well-known that this rabbi made such calls to all members living alone on a weekly basis, just to check in and see how they were doing. He replied that it would be his pleasure, but asked why she was calling him and not her own rabbi. She explained that she had spoken to her own rabbi, but that he had informed her that he does not make Erev Shabbos calls.

It is a lot to ask of any rabbi to call every single member of his shul every Erev Shabbos, but the occasional call can go quite far in letting single people know that someone cares.

Again, this is not limited to rabbis. All of us are capable of walking up to someone, saying hello, and asking how they are doing. Imagine if, every Shabbos after shul, every member would make it their business to engage in a short conversation with someone who lives alone. They would not likely spill their guts right there and then, really answering how they are doing. But that small gesture of friendship would convey the important message that they are seen.

C – CARE

Care is a feeling, but also an action. To care means to recognize the challenge of living alone and spending a three-day Yom Tov or even a long Shabbos afternoon all by oneself — and then to use that empathy to invite someone over for a meal. Every community has some *tzadikim* and *tzidkanios* who are known to look out for everyone who "needs" a meal. We may not all be able to have that many guests or invite guests that often — but everyone can have an occasional guest who may not be a best friend.

People sometimes ask me for suggestions as to which single people they can invite. I encourage them to look around in shul or to think about who lives on their block (A – Acknowledge!), as there are definitely people in our immediate orbit who would love to be invited.

In addition to personal invitations, it behooves every shul and community to have a system in place to ensure that no one spends a full Shabbos on their own. There are a wide variety of methods for this; each community should figure out what works best for them.

Care also means ensuring that the process for receiving assistance is as smooth as possible. In the Laws of Tzedakah, there is a distinction made between providing help with and without a smile. There is always room for improvement in *how* we provide care.

D – DIGNITY

I am sure that some single men and women cringed at least once or twice as they read to this point. It is uncomfortable to receive assistance from others, and it is an affront to our dignity to be seen as someone who needs help.

It does not have to be that way. Probably one of the wisest things my shul did was to include single people on our board of directors. This was not a conscious decision to be more diverse; it simply made sense to include some of our most hard-working volunteers, who happened to be single, on our board.

Only later did I learn how rare this is. And what a pity! There is so much wonderful talent that we miss out on when we limit ourselves to only married people on a board or a committee. And it is an opportunity to treat a person with the dignity they deserve.

This, however, is a two-way street. It is the responsibility of the community — but also of the single person to view themselves with dignity in the communal setting. One of the most meaningful pieces of feedback the OU has received about this entire issue is how our ad campaigns place the onus of responsibility *on everyone except the single man or woman*. I know many single men or women who do not join a shul because they feel that they do not belong. While this is often a very fair critique of the shul environment, it can lead to a tragic cycle. When a single person does not become a member of a shul, this conveys a message that they do not see themselves as a member of that community — and they are therefore not viewed by others as a member of that community.

The same is true for meals. A divorced woman I know did not appreciate being invited out for meals all the time without having the opportunity to properly reciprocate. Prior to her divorce, she had hosted friends all the time. She then decided to host Shabbos meals once again. While some of her married friends felt uncomfortable, many others did not. Regardless, she had reclaimed the dignity she deserved.

The *Navi Yeshaya* states (1:26):

וְאָשִׁיבָה שֹׁפְטַיִךְ כְּבָרִאשֹׁנָה וְיֹעֲצַיִךְ כְּבַתְּחִלָּה
אַחֲרֵי־כֵן יִקָּרֵא לָךְ עִיר הַצֶּדֶק קִרְיָה נֶאֱמָנָה׃

Then I will restore your judges as at the first, and your counselors as at the beginning;
after that you will be called 'City of Righteousness,' 'Faithful City.'

The *Navi* describes why *Yerushalayim* was destroyed: because of a society that was unjust and that did not care about all its members. What will pave the way for *Yerushalayim* to be rebuilt? Creating a community in which each and every individual is treated with care and dignity.

Bringing *Mashiach* is in our hands. It is as easy as A-B-C-D.

A Guide to Purchasing Tefillin and Mezuzos

Rabbi Michoel Frank, Kehillas Ohr HaTorah

You may have just moved and need to purchase *mezuzos* for your new home. Or you may be the father of a Bar Mitzvah *bachur* and you need to purchase *tefillin* for your son. The source for these items, whether a store, a private individual, or a *sofer*, will present you with a few options.

These options may be different price points for grades of *mezuzos* and *parshiyos* of *tefillin*. You may be presented with different kinds of *tefillin, retzu'os* (*tefillin* straps), or *ksav* (script) types. As a consumer, you may not have the knowledge necessary to make an informed choice. This short guide will provide some background to walk you through these purchases.

WHAT KIND OF KSAV DO YOU WANT?

Ksav (literally, script) refers to three primary forms of *Ashuris*: the script used to write *mezuzos*, *tefillin,* and *Sifrei Torah*. They are:

- *Ksav Beis Yosef*
- *Ksav Arizal*
- *Ksav Velish*

There are a number of differences in the way letters are formed in each of these scripts, mostly beyond the scope of this guide. Here are two quick pointers:

- Check the letter *Ches*: In *Beis Yosef*, it is two *Zayins*, connected by a triangular roof. In *Arizal*, it is a *Vav* and a *Zayin*, again connected by a triangular roof. In *Velish*, the top is a straight line, similar to the *Ches* you see in your siddur.
- Check the letter *Tzadi*: In *Beis Yosef*, both heads of the *Tzadi* are facing left. In *Arizal* and *Velish*, one is facing right and one is facing left.

Generally, if you are *Ashkenazi*, you should be using *Ksav Beis Yosef*. If you have *Chassidish minhagim*, such as davening *Nusach Sefard*, your *minhag* may be to use *Ksav Arizal*. If you are *Sefardi*, you would be using *Ksav Velish*.

Most *poskim* (with the exception of the Chazon Ish) agree that all forms are kosher according to all *minhagim*. When you bring your *mezuzos* to be checked, ask the *sofer* if they are all identically written. It is not ideal to have some *mezuzos* using *Ksav Beis Yosef* and others using *Ksav Arizal*.

HOW MUCH DO YOU WANT TO SPEND?

The merchant or *sofer* may show you three kinds of *mezuzos*, priced at, for example, $95, $115, and $130. Similar options will be presented when buying *tefillin*, where the *sofer* will show you samples of the *parshiyos* of the *tefillin* (or pictures of the choices) with significantly different price points, such as $1500, $1800, and $2100.

What is the official difference between the samples? It can be one of two things:

The quality of the writing plays a big part in the price. To the untrained eye they may seem similar and well written, but with a little direction one can discern that some are truly beautifully formed and meticulously follow *halachah*, while others are less so.

Another factor is the reputation of the *sofer* who wrote them. Some *sofrim* are established and sought after for the beauty of their writing and their *Yiras Shamayim* (fear of Heaven). This raises the value of the *tefillin* and *mezuzos* they write.

If you have access to a Rav or friend who is knowledgeable, you can send pictures of the samples to them for guidance. Generally speaking, the cheaper grades should be avoided. They tend to be sloppily written and, aside from the absence of *hiddur mitzvah* — use of a beautifully crafted item to elevate the spirituality of the *mitzvah* — inevitably give rise to numerous halachic questions about their *kashrus*. Before you contemplate a purchase, ask someone knowledgeable *how much you should expect to pay* in order to get a decent quality *mezuzah* or set of *tefillin* — and *don't pay less than that*.

Keep in mind: Wearing *tefillin* is a *mitzvah* you perform every day. *Mezuzah* is a *mitzvah* you observe every minute you are in the room with a *mezuzah*. It is a most worthwhile investment!

MY HOUSE CAME WITH A LOT OF MEZUZOS. HOW CAN I TELL IF THEY ARE OF REASONABLE QUALITY OR IF I SHOULD BE BUYING NEW ONES?

Any experienced *sofer* can tell you right away if your *mezuzos* are kosher and of good quality. But there are a few things to know in general and a few clues you can look for:

- Just because there are *mezuzah* cases on the wall does not guarantee that there are *mezuzos* in them! Make sure you check each one to see if there is a *mezuzah* inside.
- Look at the *mezuzah* carefully. I've seen a few instances in which it is only a photocopy of a *mezuzah* on paper. *Mezuzos*, of course, must be handwritten on parchment.
- Check to see that the *mezuzah* has the classic *Shin, Daled, Yud* on the outside. If that's missing, it is a bad sign.
- Start to examine the writing:
    - One giveaway to subpar or rushed writing is that the *tagin* are missing. The *tagin* (often referred to as "crowns") adorn many letters. The letter *Shin* has three *tagin* on its leftmost head, which look like three little lines with a ball on top of them. Other letters that should have three *tagin* are *Gimel, Zayin, Tes, Nun, Ayin, and Tzadi*. Some letters have only one *tag* toward the leftmost side, such as a *Beis* or a *Daled*. If you don't see any such *tagin*, it is a sign of poor writing — and the

mezuzah should be replaced. If some *tagin* are missing, or if they were written as just lines, it is a good idea to have it evaluated by a *sofer*.

- Another thing to look for is how neat or aligned the writing is. Examine the upper line of all the letters: There is an indentation in the parchment, known as a *sirtut,* which serves as a guide for the tops of the letters. The letters should all be aligned in straight lines under that indentation. If some are written a bit beneath that line, or some above, and in general the lines aren't straight, it is a sign of a rushed or inexperienced *sofer*. If letters or words go outside the margins, it also doesn't bode well for the *kashrus* of the *mezuzah*.

When buying or renting a house or apartment, unless you are assured by someone you trust who is sufficiently knowledgeable, you should check all the *mezuzos* in the home and replace them as necessary.

WHAT KIND OF RETZU'OS DO YOU WANT: BLACK ON BLACK OR BLACK ON WHITE?

There are two kinds of *retzu'os* (*tefillin* straps) available. One is the classic kind, with the front painted black and the back remaining the natural white or tan color. Lately, they have begun to dye the *retzu'os* in a manner in which the dye penetrates through and through, so that the entire strap is black on both front and back.

The benefit of black on black is that, even with deterioration of the paint on the front side of the *retzu'os*, the strap remains black. *Retzu'os* are required to be black — *halachah l'Moshe mi'Sinai* (a binding law orally transmitted to *Moshe Rabbeinu* at Sinai). If they decay and the paint rubs off, they must be repainted.

It is important to pay attention to the condition of the straps on any pair of *tefillin*, because they deteriorate the quickest. If you don't take heed, the black paint will eventually fully rub off and the front will look like the back, especially at the stretch points where it gets pulled. If you get the black on black *retzu'os*, they will remain black even when they deteriorate — which is halachically preferable. Nonetheless, there are a number of *poskim* who are uncomfortable with the idea of changing the process of producing *tefillin* from what had been the previously accepted practice. That would be a reason to choose the standard black and white *retzu'os*.

FROM WHOM SHOULD I BE PURCHASING MY TEFILLIN AND MEZUZOS?

This is an important question to consider. There are many *sofrim* who write *tefillin* and *mezuzos*, and not all are on the same level of piety. The picture you may have of a white-bearded *sofer* in *Yerushalayim*, detached from this world, is not the current reality. It takes a great level of *Yiras Shamayim* to write kosher *mezuzos* and *tefillin*, for a number of reasons:

- The *sofer* has to be well-versed in the *halachos* of writing and forming the letters, which are complex and extensive. Even if they studied these laws once, they must constantly review them, because they are easily forgotten.
- Writing a *mezuzah* requires three to four hours of work, generally a full day. Writing the *parshiyos* for *tefillin* takes even longer. The smallest mishap can render the *mezuzah* halachically unusable — and all that work is lost. A dishonest *sofer* may surreptitiously correct the error, and no one would be able to tell. The same applies for *tefillin*. Unless we have full faith in the honesty, knowledge, and piety of the *sofer*, we cannot know that the product is kosher.

Likewise, the *batim* (boxes) of the *tefillin* need to be created according to *halachah*. Here, too, there may be defects which can't really be corrected — yet a dishonest craftsman may utilize non-kosher methods and then camouflage them with paint. Trust is required.

This is why, when buying *tefillin* and *mezuzos*, the merchant selling these products has to be someone you trust to source his stock from reputable, pious, and honest individuals. You should always seek recommendations of reliable merchants or *sofrim*. Sometimes *mezuzos* and *tefillin* will come with a *hechsher* (*kashrus* certification) attached. These can be relied upon, depending on the quality of the *hechsher*.

Do You Know — or Just Assume — That Your *Mezuzos* are Kosher? How STAMP is Revolutionizing the World of *STa"M*

Rabbi Avraham Lessin: Director, STAMP

The *pasuk* in *Tehillim* reads:

מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד בְּבָרְחוֹ מִפְּנֵי אַבְשָׁלוֹם בְּנוֹ.

A song of David, as he fled from Absalom his son. (3:1)

Dovid HaMelech was running for his life, being chased by his own son, Avshalom. Yet this *pasuk* indicates that, at that moment, Dovid composed a *mizmor* — a song of praise! Chazal ask, "A *mizmor*?!?" Under such circumstances, it should say קִינָה לְדָוִד — *a lamentation of David*! We say *kinnos* during tragic times, not *mizmorim*!

One explanation is that Dovid HaMelech knew that a coup against a king normally originates from a rebel group. But from your own son? That was so unexpected and so rare that it was, in and of itself, a sign that the sequence of events was orchestrated by Hashem.

I grew up in Silver Spring on Auth Lane. I lived around the corner from the Mayberg family on Hermleigh Road. My mother taught their children; my wife-to-be taught their children. We *davened* at the same *shul*. Yet, beyond that, our paths never crossed. I personally didn't know them, nor did they know me.

Fast forward ten years to 2018: I was married, living in Yerushalayim, and working as a *sofer STa"M* (a scribe who writes *Sifrei Torah*, *Tefillin*, and *Mezuzos*) and *Baal Magiah* (certified checker of *STa"M*). My parents had moved from Silver Spring to Richmond, Virginia, where we had originally lived. I received an email from Rabbi Dovid Asher, Rav of Keneseth Beth Israel in Richmond, notifying me that he had passed my name along to the Mayberg Foundation, which had recently begun a project called MyZuzah — with the goal of ensuring that every Jewish home worldwide would have a kosher *mezuzah* on its front door. Rabbi Asher figured: if Rabbi Lessin is a reliable source for *mezuzos* and MyZuzah needs *mezuzos*, let's make a *shidduch*! And so the relationship between myself and the Maybergs began. I went on to obtain and check over 10,000 *mezuzos* for them over the next five years, enabling thousands of Jewish homes to be adequately protected and connected.

Just as in Dovid HaMelech's story, the sequence of events that led to the bond between myself and the Mayberg family was quite unconventional, given how much overlap there was in our backgrounds. But Hashem always waits for the perfect time to bring people together. That is the sign that it's a perfect match.

As my relationship with the Maybergs deepened through our work on MyZuzah, one theme came up repeatedly in our conversations: How is it that so many people take their *mezuzos*, *tefillin*, and *Sifrei Torah* to be checked and find such serious problems?

Our inquiries gave me the opportunity to reveal the hidden world of *STa"M* to the Maybergs, shedding more and more light on how dysfunctional and fragmented the entire process was:

- An enormous percentage of *sofrim* without proper certification or organized oversight
- Materials (*klaf*, ink, *batim*, *retzuos*, etc.) manufactured without proper supervision
- A massive shortage of *magihim* (certified checkers)[1]
- Even if your *mezuzah* was written by a certified *sofer*, on and with reliably produced *klaf* and ink, and checked by a certified and reliable *magiah*, who was responsible for ensuring that all of these boxes were checked before it headed to market?
- And even if a particular individual did, in fact, oversee the process, why was all of the information about the item and its process of creation consistently (often even purposefully) unavailable to the buyer?

The *STa"M* industry was sorely lacking the same supervision and accountability available in the kashrus field. The eventual owners of these *Sta"M* items, who fully assumed that they were fulfilling the *mitzvah* properly, were the victims. Many consumers didn't even come to this awareness until years, or even decades, after purchasing the item. They bought it from someone who appeared reliable and, beyond that, no further information was obtainable. "It looks like a *mezuzah*…and the seller told me that it came from Israel…so it must be kosher!"

After discussing this issue for over a year and sharing one horror story after another, Mrs. Mayberg and her dear friend Pamela Claman asked me to join them for lunch outside the Old City of Jerusalem. On that summer day in 2019, they charged me with crafting a solution to this longstanding issue. It was then and there that we decided to build the *STa"M* industry's first *hashgacha* organization to offer a comprehensive solution to the rampant unreliability and disorder in the field.

That is how STAMP (The STa"M Project) was born. I approached five of the *STa"M* field's leading halachic authorities throughout Eretz Yisrael about the idea; we held a series of strategy sessions to determine what challenges most urgently needed to be solved and how we could most effectively solve them. But I knew that, beyond instituting standards and regulations within the *STa"M* industry, we also needed to help the general Jewish public understand the dire necessity for *hashgacha* on all *STa"M* items. Most Jews throughout the world are not even aware that such a problem exists! They simply assume that what they have is kosher!

To accomplish this, I focused on two key approaches: First, I began building relationships with some of America's leading *rabonim* and halachic authorities, as well as community *rabonim*, to make them aware of this issue *and solution* and to garner their support. Second, I created various presentations to share with communities around the U.S., explaining the complex process of *STa"M* creation and the inevitable pitfalls that occur when no organized oversight is in place.

There was still one frequent, lingering question: "How do you know with certainty that this problem is as big as you're making it out to be?"

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[1] *STa"M* ***must*** be checked by a *magiah* (see *Shulchan Aruch OC* 32:21). Similar to the difference between an author and an editor, a *magiah* possesses a completely different skill set from that of a *sofer*.

We began to compile the greatest empirical evidence possible. We evaluated (and in many cases even had to purchase) *mezuzos* sold by tens of Judaica shops around the U.S. and many private sellers — and offered free *mezuzah* checking to over 250 families from various communities around the country — to get an indication of what was out there. The results were indisputable, but not at all surprising: 72% of all *mezuzos* we evaluated were either *kasher b'dieved* (barely kosher) or completely *pasul* (unfit for use).

When I received the follow-up question — "How could that be?!" — I would always respond, "How could it *not* be?!" Unreliability is the natural consequence of having no proper supervision and oversight.

Today, this picture has been completely flipped upside down: You can purchase your *mezuzos* with a *hechsher* and feel totally confident that "you got what you paid for." STAMP, a nonprofit organization with absolutely no involvement in the buying or selling of any *STa"M* that it certifies, implements a comprehensive system that certifies *mezuzos* and takes full responsibility for the *kashrus* of each and every item.

What's more, STAMP has a strong and fruitful partnership with the Orthodox Union, which means that every *mezuzah* we certify is OU-certified as well. Every *mezuzah* is written by a STAMP-certified *sofer*, using only *klaf* and ink approved by STAMP's rabbinic board, and is checked by two STAMP-certified *magihim* as well as our state-of-the-art computerized checking software. The *mezuzah* is then assigned a certificate of authenticity, displaying every detail of that item, along with a unique QR code linking the item to STAMP's database to verify its authenticity. The *mezuzah* and its certificate are then sealed together in a tamper-proof plastic sleeve, ensuring the end-user that the item has not been touched since it became STAMP-certified and left our checking branch.

STAMP is revolutionizing the entire *STa"M* industry, instituting standards of transparency, accountability, and professional development. It enables every Jew to purchase their *STa"M* with assuredness that the item is kosher, has been reliably produced, and is fit to be used to properly fulfill the *mitzvah*.

For more details about what we do and how we do it, for countless educational resources, and to bring STAMP-certified *STa"M* and STAMP educational events to your neighborhood, please visit our website: thestamproject.org.

VAAD HARABANIM
THE RABBINICAL COUNCIL *of* GREATER WASHINGTON

Vaad HaRabanim of Greater Washington
The Rabbinical Council of Greater Washington

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The Vaad HaRabanim of Greater Washington is an organization of Orthodox rabbis that provides the Greater Washington Jewish community with critical services such as *kashrus* supervision, a *beis din* for the administration of Jewish divorce, a *beis din* for arbitration of financial disputes, and a *beis din* for conversion. In addition, the Vaad, also known as the Rabbinical Council, acts as a rabbinic resource and supports vital communal service organizations such as the *Chevra Kadisha*, *Bikur Cholim*, *Yad Yehuda* and the *Mikvah Emunah* Society. Members of the Vaad HaRabanim are dedicated to serving the broader Jewish community in whatever way possible and appreciate the opportunity to do so.