

# Kabbalat Torah

5779

קבלת תורה

May 31, 2019

27 Iyyar 5779



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## Welcome

## ברוכים הבאים

Dear KT Class of 5779,

This KT ceremony is a bittersweet moment; sweet in its celebration of your accomplishments and your relationship with your family, Judaism, and the Beth Emet community, and bitter because it's so hard to see you leave Beth Emet. I've known some of you since you were born and many of you since you were very young. I've watched you grow and develop for so many years. I remember many of you from the time you were in the Early Childhood program and all of you at your b'nei mitzvah when you read Torah, led us in worship, and grappled with the meaning of a Torah portion. You seemed so grown up then, but look how much you've matured in your thinking and your ability to grapple with challenging ideas in the last five years! As you have shown by staying involved at Beth Emet, b'nei mitzvah is not the end, but the bridge—Gesher—as we call our seventh grade program—to Jewish adulthood. Jewish learning really gets good after you become b'nei mitzvah and can really delve into Jewish teachings in a deeper and more sophisticated way. As you become adults, I hope you've learned that Judaism provides a roadmap for how you can lead a good and ethical life and develop a spiritual life that can sustain you throughout your lives.

This year in KT we wrestled with ways to think about God, how Jewish teachings challenge us to look thoughtfully and critically at the prevailing attitudes in our society, and to think about how you will live your life as a Jewish adult when you are on your

own. I've been impressed with your insights, your questions, and how much you care about each other and Judaism.

We've also had a lot of fun this year. I enjoyed our Wednesday dinners together before class when we had a chance to hear about what was going on in our lives and eat a lot of felafal and drink a lot of tea. I hope your tea mugs will remind you of our conversations, the nuggets of wisdom you learned, and the laughter we shared. I loved our trip to New York, taking in the Jewish sites, worshiping at diverse congregations, and grappling with the deep philosophical questions over Shabbat dinner.

As you finish your formal education at Beth Emet and venture out into the wide world, I hope that what you've learned and experienced here will be a source of support and guidance and will bring a smile to your face. Know that wherever you go, we will always be here for you at Beth Emet. We're just a text, email, Facebook message, or phone call away. And don't forget to visit when you're in town!

May you be blessed with good health, exciting adventures, and a strong Jewish identity. *Hazak V'amatz*—may you go from strength to strength.

Mazel Tov,

Rabbi Andrea London

**Isabella Allen**

My time this year at KT has challenged my faith and what I believe more so than any other year. This struggle is something that I looked forward to each week, which is unusual for most people. Looking forward to this struggle is part of the reason why I believe in my faith. I think this because if you do not struggle with your faith, then is it really your faith or just an idea that has been shoved down in your throat like in school. We also often talk about the good that faith instills in us. One thing that is instilled through our faith is a sense of compassion for others. Without having a compassion for others an unjust and equitable world is created.



## **Ilan Elenbogen-Siegel**

People often tell me stories about my first days at Beth Emet. I went around in a green and orange baby bjorn attached to one of my parents. Apparently, I lifted my head towards the Rabbi and cantor and smiled at the strange faces greeting me. These faces would later become my community.



I began walking to Beth Emet when I was 18 months old and started preschool. Bonim (builders) helped me begin building my Jewish character and introduced me to interests I still have today like creating art. Little did I know, when I was spilling paint on my clothes and drawing funny faces, that art would become a big part of my life in the future.

My Jewish education continued after preschool when I started elementary school at Solomon Schechter Day School. Jewish prayers and Hebrew language became part of my day to day life. While Schechter helped me prepare for my Bar Mitzvah immensely, I learned real Jewish values at Beth Emet. When I came back to Beth Emet in middle school, not only did we learn about using Hebrew and prayers, but also about Jewish ethics such as feeding the poor and welcoming the stranger. We began looking at social issues through a Jewish lens. In 6th grade we got a chance to think about Jewish values that we hold close to us. Later we talked about sex education and gender identity. Learning about such dense topics early on opened my mind and helped me become more aware and accepting of people in different places on the gender spectrum.

Going into high school I developed leadership skills by becoming an assistant teacher and art room manager at Beit Sefer. I got to share some of my knowledge about Hebrew and art with Beth Emet children. It was fulfilling to see the students explore these topics, for some of them, for the first time.

One of the highlights of my high school experience at Beth Emet was the immersion trip to El Paso and Mexico. The trip allowed us to live some of the values we were introduced to earlier like welcoming the stranger and feeding the poor. While at the soup kitchen at Beth Emet I was able to feed the less fortunate, the Church that sheltered refugees in El Paso led to a mutual giving. We cooked and ate together with the refugees and were enlightened by their stories. This helped me understand the importance of helping people by engaging with them and knowing them as individuals.

My final year at Beth Emet has brought me the closest to my Rabbi and classmates. The trip to New York was full of laughs and excitement. I had a great time sharing the experience of learning about Judaism in New York. Later in Evanston, sitting around the table and in the basement at Rabbi London's house was both fun and enriching. We read texts about Jewish philosophy and related them to our own experiences. I will savor the memories of these Wednesday night get-togethers with our personal mugs filled with tea. I know my mug and the warm memories of my time at Beth Emet will travel with me to college next year. I am so grateful to Rabbi London and the Beth Emet community for having kept this safe and creative space throughout my entire life.

## Leah Hurwitz

Shabbat Shalom. Standing up here tonight has been a long time coming and yet I still can't believe I am here. A few months ago, while walking along New York City streets after dinner,



Claudia began talking about her Great Books class at New Trier which I lived vicariously through. She brought up some deep philosophical question. We walked along the streets without really paying attention as we were so engrossed in this conversation. We talked about the meaning of life, existentialism, and all those types of things. I went to bed exhausted, confused, and unsatisfied. I was on thought overboard. I wrote in my journal that night, "I love New York and these people. I have too many thoughts in my head to write."

I woke up the next morning and we went to Saturday morning services. And while I'd love to be able to say that I had some profound realization during the *Amida*, I didn't. I just felt more confused. We attended services at synagogues vastly different from this one. There was little English in some, an intimidating *mechitza* in another. I thought a lot about the women's position here. "My Judaism is so much better than theirs." "How can they not feel so oppressed and belittled in here?" I was upset and confused. The unfamiliarity of the whole morning threw me off. Where are the tunes that I know so well? When are we going to sing the Debbie Freedman songs?

So I carry on throughout the day in crisis mode. What is even happening anymore? I wondered. What is religion? What is God? I couldn't take it. And then we walked into Zabars. Oh. This is God. If you don't know, Zabars is a Jewish deli and grocery store in New York. Claudia, Ella, and I walked around gathering food we just had to have. Knishes, black and white cookies. Being surrounded by food and New York Jews on Shabbat, I was comforted by the familiarity of it. It's like

Kaufman's on drugs. So I knew a little bit more how to navigate that situation than a synagogue so unlike mine and a philosophical conversation that I was way out of my league for.

Later that evening, after a close call with someone here losing a phone and a funny interaction with a dog, a few of us sat in the hotel room. We had been out all day and had seen the Broadway show *The Bands Visit* but we were still wide awake. We talked about many many things that night many of which I don't even remember. But I do remember laughing so hard. A few hours earlier, with the same people, I was amidst an existential crisis. And now I was laughing to the point of tears about some Tarot cards we'd just read.

This to me is the meaning of life. It's not having answers to all these questions or trying to unpack the nuances and intersectionality of religion and feminism. It's doing all of that while also being able to eat yummy food with friends and laugh about silly things. My senior year was not always easy and I had a lot of mini-crises as I called them. I would get so stuck in trying to understand myself and life and all the complexities of both of them that I wasn't always able to enjoy all the things going on around me. Turns out it took a trip to Zabar's to help me find some sort of solace.

After we returned to Evanston and begun the weekly classes at Rabbi London's, we read many powerful texts that have stuck with me. But no sentence has had more of an impact on me than this one from *My Grandfather's Blessings* by Rachel Naomi Remen: "After all these years I have begun to wonder if the secret of living well is not in having all the answers but in pursuing unanswerable questions in good company." My KT classmates have been the best company. Thank you and Shabbat Shalom.



## **Ella Kanter**

Spring break of my sophomore year, I went to El Paso, Texas with Beth Emet on a border immersion program. We stayed in a church that housed refugees. Every night, we prayed with the refugees, ate dinner with them, and then, those who were willing would share their stories with us. One man in particular shared a heart-breaking story about the violence and cruelty he faced in his home country, on his long journey, and upon arriving in the U.S. I wondered, how did he persevere? How did he stay strong in the midst of violence, danger, poverty, fear, uncertainty? The answer is -- his faith. He spoke about his faith in God, in humanity, in the good of the world. Honestly, I didn't get it. I didn't understand how the surreal and inconceivable concept of "God" could hold so much power in guiding someone forward. Flash forward two years, after a semester of participating in KT, and I am finally beginning to understand what God really is, at least for me, and how powerful the concept of God really can be.

As I figured out at the second or third KT meeting, God, surprise surprise, is not an old man with a beard sitting on the clouds, but, perhaps, the connection between all humans; the unity of all beings, organisms and things. When Rabbi offered up this nugget, this alternative definition of God, I was like, whaaaat?! In so many prayers and passages of the Torah, God is humanized. God has the pronoun "he", god commands things, god tells Noah to build the arc, etcetera. This type of human-like god -- I had always struggled to believe in. But thinking about God as the power, connection and unity between all -- that, I understood. This interpretation encourages us to appreciate the magic of life, humans, the way the sun shines, the cyclical nature of seasons and days and life... It



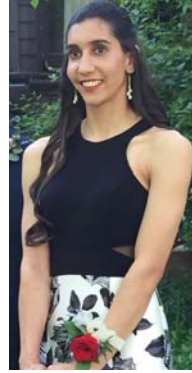
encourages us to appreciate and find the good in one another. To quote one of Rabbi's other nuggets, Judaism is about deed, not creed. It's about doing, acting, and asking what now? The practice of Judaism, in my eyes, is about acting on the belief that we are all connected. It is acknowledging how our actions and beings affect the lives of other humans, and how we play a role in systems of oppression. It is treating others with kindness and empathy -- even people you don't know, or people who seem nothing like you. It is taking conscious action to better ourselves and to strengthen the connection between us all.

Looking back at El Paso, and at the refugee's story, I understand the strength of faith for him. Even though he probably does not interpret God in the exact same way as I do now, I see how God led him to find good in the midst of utter hardship. I see how God helped him move forward. For both me and this man, God is not just an old, wise, bearded guy but a way to reflect, find good in one another, and move forward with hope.

I want to thank Rabbi London for all of your nuggets and for truly changing the way in which I look at the world. And, of course, for your wide selection of tea and your fabulous mugs. I already miss our Wednesday nights, and I will always remember "pursuing unanswerable questions in good company" with you all.

## Gracie Styler

I've spent most of my life here at Beth Emet--from going to Kahal at a young age to attending Hebrew School. While there have been many changes over the years, the one thing that has stayed the same are the people I've met. My first friends were from pre-school here and most of the staff has watched me grow up. It's kind of weird to think about how they remember me as a toddler and yet my first memory of them is when I was five. As I've gotten older my role at Beth Emet has changed. While I'm still a student, I've also become a teacher. I teach young children through music. I've been a *madricha* for three years now helping lead services during Sunday School. Over the years I've realized that song leading has become a big part of Jewish identity and I find joy in teaching children Jewish songs from my childhood. In the end it's one big circle which is why I love Beth Emet. My hope is that as I grow older I will continue with my song leading adventure because that's what makes me feel connected to the Jewish community.



## Maxime Visa

Judaism is an interpretive religion, and the Torah is largely contextual. A few key ideas and concepts have stuck with me through the course of the Kabbalat Torah class, and this quote is one of them. In all



of my years of being a Jewish identifying individual, I have always struggled with understanding what the Torah is, as well as who God is. I have always enjoyed going to Friday night services and being a part of the Beth Emet community, though I have never felt the same way about God. This is largely in part due to my misconstrued concept of God as a physical embodiment, an “old white bearded man on a throne in the sky” type of view.

Through different texts, books, excerpts, and conversations, I have learned that to me, God is nothing of the sort. Although I have yet to forge my own perception of God in my life, reading about other individual’s perceptions and definitions of God’s entity in their life has provided me with much clarity; God is interpretive. This means that God's presence and meaning has not been set in stone for me, and that I can choose who, what, where, when, why, or even how, God is.

Similarly, I have always had trouble understanding the Torah: Who really wrote it? Why do we read it? And, how is it relevant to us today? The story we are taught from the Torah in which god handed the Torah to Moses in Sinai further solidified my perception of god as a physical entity. Literally speaking, I have never understood this passage, let alone fathom its possibility considering I never believed in a physically embodied God.

However, this story makes sense to me when I consider the Torah to be an interpretive text, like god. Rabbi London helped me understand over the course of many Wednesday nights that the Torah is more than a large scroll of stories that we read on Saturday morning. The Torah can provide us with morals, lessons, and teachings that are applicable not only to when the Torah was written but to our lives as well.

Today, I see the Torah as a set of Jewish guidelines that I can choose to incorporate into my actions, thoughts, and behaviors. Because my perspective and understanding of how the Torah's relevance and purpose to me has changed, I know that in the future I will be able to make much more of the Torah's teachings and text studies than I have before my time in Kabbalat Torah. Today, the Torah is not a fictional component of Judaism that I indirectly relate to through my religion, but rather a resource I can seek out to in pursuit of staying true to my Jewish values.







## **One Day**

**by Matisyahu**

Sometimes I lay under the moon  
I thank God I'm breathing  
And then I pray don't take me soon  
I am here for a reason  
Sometimes in my tears I drown  
But I never let it get me down  
So when negativity surrounds  
I know some day it'll all turn around  
Because  
All my life I've been waiting for  
I've been praying for  
For the people to say  
That we don't wanna fight no more  
They'll be no more war  
And our children will play  
One day One day One day (x2)  
  
One day this all will change  
Treat people the same  
Stop with the violence  
Down with the hate  
One day we'll all be free  
And proud to be  
Under the same sun  
Singing songs of freedom like  
One day One day One day (x2)  
Chorus