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TEMPLE BETH TORAH, 130 MAIN STREET  
WETHERSFIELD, CONNECTICUT

# Tu biShvat Message from Rabbi Seth Riemer

**PLEASE PUT THIS DATE ON YOUR CALENDAR:**

Sunday, January 20 at 4:30 p.m. (Scroll to the end of this article for more details.)

**M**any Jewish festivals center on celebration of Nature's bounties. Tu biShvat (day 15 in the Hebrew month of Shevat), this year taking place on January 20-21, focuses on fruit trees. At this time of year in eretz yisrael, forests and fields are awaking from their solstice slumber, and tree-buds have started to appear. The tree sap, symbolic of our rising human hopes, surges up in late winter to nourish the tree, reinvigorate it, and make it blossom and flourish. The tall, fruitful tree is symbolic as well of Judaism's emphasis on learning and enacting Torah, which nurtures Jews' best instincts and directs our highest aspirations.

Our Torah service ritual pays a great deal of attention to the sefer torah, the Torah scroll itself. Someone cradles the scroll in his or her arms and parades around the sanctuary. People kiss the scroll as it passes by. The scroll, adorned with its beautiful mantle, is undressed and redressed and, after being read from, held up proudly. As the service concludes, the Torah is returned to its ark, the curtain drawn shut. These gestures of adoration convey the image of an infant's being held, caressed, shown off as it's raised high in the air and, after all that stimulating activity, put to bed for a nap. We can picture a dependent—even helpless—young creature being put through her daily routines by adults who coddle and coo over her and know how to take good care of her. The words we recite when we put the Torah back in the ark almost contradict that impression.

We chant, "she is a tree of life to those who grasp her, / and whoever holds onto her is happy (Proverbs 3:18 / translation in sefaria.org). Our very act of sustaining the Torah, this verse suggests, is what sustains us. Rabbis thus teach that the Torah is primarily what enables us to live and thrive. But follow that symbolism a step further: the Torah, which I am picturing as a young child, takes care of

us but only on condition that we take care of it! The support between children and grownups is mutual.

We give and give to help our children, but they have something precious to give in return. I have always felt I learn from my students (and children of my own) as much as or even more than they learn from me. There's a Talmudic play on words based on the following prophetic passage: "All your children are taught of Adonay" (Isaiah 54:13). The Hebrew word for "your children" is banayih. The Talmud's pun: "Do not read 'your children' (banayih) but 'your builders' (bonayih)" (Babylonian Talmud, Berahot 64a). As long as we teach Torah to our children, they will build us up.

The symbolism of reciprocity between Torah and the people Israel ties in well with what we know about trees' role in planet earth's ecosystem. Trees (and other plants) breathe in the carbon dioxide we (and other animals) exhale and supply us oxygen in return. Indiscriminate commerce-driven logging in rainforests (such as the Amazon River basin) is leading to an excess of carbon dioxide and dearth of oxygen in the earth's atmosphere. Likewise, as Jews increasingly cut Torah learning and values out of their lives, Jewish culture is weakening. Both environmental disruption and Jewish deculturation (among the majority of Jews, that is) are the result. If, on the other hand, we protect the delicate environment that is so dependent upon us, it will protect us, and if Jews reengage with their Torah tradition, it will strengthen them. Trees and people are interdependent; so too are Torah and Jews.

I hope you'll join me at TBT's annual Tu biShvat seder, which takes place on Sunday, January 20, at 4:30 p.m. It's (quite literally!) a sweet occasion—as, in contemporary fashion and in keeping with a Kabbalistic tradition dating back to the 16th century, we taste the delicious fruits of trees.

# Offering comfort and support

## Faith communities join Temple Beth Torah for Solidarity Shabbat

by Mara Dresner...reproduced from *Wethersfield Life*

After attending the 10th anniversary celebration brunch in October for Rabbi Seth Riemer of Temple Beth Torah, Rose Riley, a warden of Trinity Episcopal Church felt a connection with the synagogue. Less than two weeks later, following the shootings at Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh's Squirrel Hill neighborhood, Riley and fellow Warden Denise Paternostro reached out to Riemer again. They sent a note of condolence and a request to attend TBT's Friday evening service that welcomes in the Sabbath.

"It was just so, it was so hard to take," Riley, who learned of the shootings while watching television, said.

"We were just saying we're all children of God. We may worship in different ways, but someone was shot in the midst of praying, in the midst of being in with God," she added. "[Attending services] showed solidarity and that we're children of God together, with the hope we could bring some peace and balm, that just our presence would bring some easing of their suffering."

Riemer also received a note from the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community in Meriden offering its assistance. His wife, Barbara Checknoff, attended a vigil for the shooting victims in West Hartford.

"When I came home from the West Hartford vigil the day after the shooting, Seth and I talked about Northwest Catholic is the school where you know you belong. We are a diverse, Catholic, co-ed, college preparatory community. 98% of our graduates continue on to four-year colleges and universities, many with merit-based scholarships. Last year we sent students to schools such as Yale, Holy Cross, RPI, and the U.S. Coast Guard Academy. To see a more comprehensive list of our college acceptances, visit [northwest-catholic.org/about/collegeprep](http://northwest-catholic.org/about/collegeprep). [northwest-catholic.org](http://northwest-catholic.org) "All my college applications are in, and I'm excited to discover what's next for me." what kind of response we should plan for TBT. I came up with the idea of inviting all the congregations in Wethersfield, plus the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, to our Friday night service," Checknoff said. Because of personal commitments, it was a couple of days before she was able to contact the other faith communities.

"I composed a letter for the churches to send out to their membership. I was so worried that people wouldn't come on such short notice or that they wouldn't want to come," she said.

"I looked forward to Friday night like I look forward to getting a tooth extracted. I had no idea what the response would be. I got contact information straight from Wethersfield's website. I composed a letter that each congregation could email out to their members, talking about why we wanted to invite them, all the details, including my contact info. "I also composed a letter to be sent out to the TBT membership. Then I got waylaid by appointments and other obligations, so I didn't start calling churches until Wednesday. I was really nervous about the short notice. But the people I spoke with, some clergy but mostly office staff, were receptive and kind," Checknoff said. "Before I had a chance to contact them, Holy Trinity reached out to us and wanted to come on Friday. Great minds think alike. In all, I reached out to six churches. Because time was running out, I didn't get to calling churches that didn't have a website. I felt bad about that and would like to contact every church if we do another interfaith event."

The pews of the Temple Beth Torah sanctuary were filled Nov. 2 as more than 100 people attended the service. In addition to synagogue members, representatives from Corpus Christi Church, the First Church of Christ in Wethersfield, St. Paul Lutheran Church, Trinity Episcopal Church, Wethersfield United Methodist Church, Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church and the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community were present, as well as those not affiliated with any faith community.

It was a warm, rainy evening, and Checknoff made the decision to leave the front doors facing Old Main Street open throughout the service. "I really wanted that. It symbolized to me that all are welcome and also that we might be afraid, but we will keep our doors open in spite of the fear," she said.

The synagogue ran out of prayer books and strangers and members sat together, sharing the books during the hour-long service that was conducted in Hebrew and English, with Riemer accompanying some prayers on his guitar.

He said "the energy of kindness and caring" was the highlight of the evening for him. "It reflects this nation's pluralistic tradition and the importance that tradition has for the future of peace and security within American society. What message did this service send? Our differences are not a threat to social harmony, but its essence," he said. During the service Riemer offered time for

attendees to share their thoughts. For Ellen Sue Moses, a TBT board member, the events in Pittsburgh were personal. "I grew up in Squirrel Hill and am a second-generation Squirrel Hill native. I needed to be with my TBT community during this time and with those who came in support of their local Jewish community," said Moses, who said she appreciated feeling the love and support of those attending.

"Though we may follow different paths, we are all in this together. Fighting hatred and bigotry is everyone's work. It may be our community in the crosshairs today, but it has been and will continue to be others unless we fight back together. We cannot sit back complacently hoping others will do the work," she added.

Other communities across North America organized similar services in what came to be known as Solidarity Shabbat. Checknoff's fears that no one would show for the service were clearly unfounded. "I thought the great response showed how much a community wants to be there for each other. That's the greatest deterrent to hate, just people caring about each other. When hatred and bigotry show their ugly faces, people refuse to turn a blind eye. When given the opportunity, they will gather to stand up for tolerance and love," she said.

"Though only a few people spoke, the time Seth gave for personal comments was very moving. But my own favorite part was before the service

began, standing in the entrance, welcoming so many people as they arrived. I was overwhelmed." The Rev. Sheila M. Beckford, pastor of Wethersfield United Methodist Church, attended the service with about a dozen members of her congregation.

"Our neighbors were suffering, and due to their suffering, we all suffered. We know violence and hatred all too well and in moments of songs, prayers and praise, we were comforted by God's embrace," Beckford said. "We cannot let religious beliefs or differences in our understanding of God separate us from the love of God and neighbor. The highlight of the evening for me was this – we were all comforted." WL

You can access the pages of Wethersfield Life on their website.

[https://view.publitas.com/p222-6222/wl\\_0119\\_layout/page/8-9](https://view.publitas.com/p222-6222/wl_0119_layout/page/8-9)

# TORAH STUDY AT TBT

By Micki Bellamy

On the second Shabbat of most months, 9:30ish Jewish time, a group of us led by Rabbi Seth gather in the TBT social hall to study Torah. Fueled with coffee and nosh, we immerse ourselves in words of Torah. As Jews we are aptly known as the People of the Book, and our engagement with Torah is unique. Torah study is not a class in which we passively sit and receive information. Rather, it is a wide ranging conversation—a conversation between each one of us and the text, and with each other. All are welcome, and all have much to contribute.

This emphasis on questioning and dialogue distinguishes the Jewish approach to study. Consider the page layout of our sacred texts—the Talmud, with a snippet of Mishnah at its center, followed by the analyzing Gemara, and surrounded by centuries of commentators responding to (and arguing with) the text and one another. In synagogue we read Torah from a scroll, but the biblical text has received the same investigative attention as the Mishnah, most obviously in commentaries called Mikra'ot Gedolot, “Great Scriptures.” There, the biblical text takes centerstage, bordered by translation (every translation is an interpretation), and commentary—a hubbub of voices across time and space.



In our tradition the reading of the Torah is divided into fifty-four parshiyot read over the course of a year, a cycle that begins and ends on Simchat Torah. For several years the TBT Torah Study Group followed the annual cycle, each study session dropping into the text at that week's parshah. But this year, having returned to Genesis once again, we decided to take a new approach. Creation, Adam and Eve (and the serpent), Cain and Abel—so much there for us to consider! We are now making our way through the Torah without concern for the calendar, intending to read from Bereshit (Genesis) through Devarim (Deuteronomy).

Please come and join the conversation!

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ  
בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוָּנוּ לְעִסוֹק בְּדַבְרֵי תוֹרָה.

Baruch atah, Adonai Eloheinu, Melech haolam, asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav  
v'tzivanu laasok b'divrei Torah.

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of all, who hallows us with mitzvot,  
commanding us to engage with words of Torah.

*Mazel Tov!*

## We are so proud that our own **Gary Evans** has been named Wethersfield's new town manager!

*From The Hartford Courant*

**A longtime Wethersfield resident and a deputy director for the City of New Britain has been named Wethersfield's new town manager.**

**Gary A. Evans** was named to the position after a six-month search. Evans currently works as a grants administrator and deputy director for the City of New Britain. He will begin the new role on March 1.

"I am thrilled with the outcome of our search and look forward to working with Gary Evans," Mayor Amy Morrin Bello said. "He has an impressive resume with both education and government experience that were important to the council. He will be a dynamic leader and as a longtime resident of Wethersfield, Gary has knowledge of Wethersfield and passion for his community."



Evans will replace interim town manager Kathy Bagley, who stepped into the role in June to replace former town manager Jeff Bridges. Bridges resigned on June 8 and took a job as Seward, Alaska's city manager. Bridges had served in Wethersfield for nine years prior to his departure.

Evans has a master's degree in public administration from Post University and a bachelor's degree in politics and government from the University of Hartford. He was selected from four finalists. His salary was set at \$135,000.

Evans has served as the director of community development and special projects for the city of Norwich, and as the director of Community Development, Housing and Asset Building for Co-opportunity Inc. in Hartford.

"I am excited to serve the community in which my family has lived for almost two decades," Evans said. "I look forward to joining the existing, talented staff and using my past experiences to continue the progress already happening in the town."



# INVITATION TO TBT MUSIC CIRCLE



**Date: February 24, 2019 a Sunday from 12:30 PM-2:30 PM at Temple Beth Torah, 130 Main St, Wethersfield,**

Interested musicians are invited to participate in the FIRST monthly guided music sight reading session of Jewish orientated (secular/sacred) music. "TBT Music Circle," bring your instrument, music stand, and a pencil. **Helene Rosenblatt** will provide music from Jewish repertoire including secular and sacred tunes from many countries for C,Bb, Eb instruments (other transpositions as requested or needed), minimum musical knowledge requirement - read in 2/4, 3/4, 6/8,4/4, 2/2, meters, be able to play in key signatures with no,1, 2, 3,4 sharps or flats. Percussionist who can read or improvise welcome - All string, wind and keyboard instruments welcome - including accordion, guitars,harp, mandolin, recorders, etc. No Religious requirement. There is a \$5 fee to cover copying costs.

Please RSVP to Chambermusic1@yahoo.com.

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## TBT BOOK CLUB

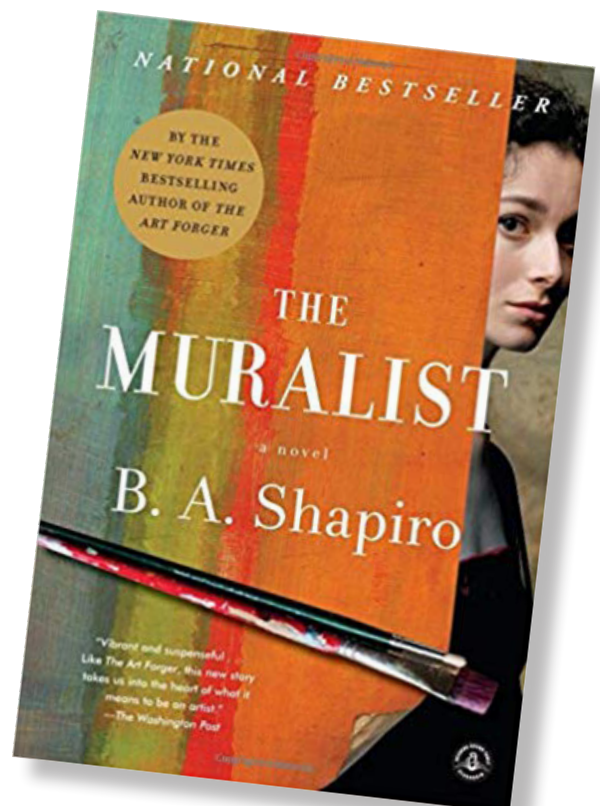
The TBT Book Club met Thursday, Jan. 10th in the TBT vestry. There was a good discussion about "The Muralist" by B.A. Shapiro. It is a mystery about a Jewish artist's family in 1940 and then in 2015, trying to escape German-occupied France. Even Eleanor Roosevelt and some famous modern artists get into the story.

Attending were, of course, Cecile, as well as Jeanne, Carol, Ruth, Ellen Sue and Mark. Everyone enjoyed the book and recommend it.

The next meeting will be March 7 at 3:15 in the vestry but so far the next book hasn't been selected.

Stay tuned.

*Cecile*





# This year's Chanukah Party was a bang up success!

Folks made reservations to attend the Annual Chanukah Party on Dec. 9th,  
A dairy lunch with loads of latkes, egg salad, tuna salad and desserts was served.

**Thanks to our latke mavens and those who helped to set up and clear!**

**And it was great how families  
brought their menorahs  
to the party for  
the special group lighting  
with blessings!**



**Lets do it again next year...**





Thanks to all who sent in party photos for the Star.





# More Chanukah Party Pix!

Great job by  
Laura Klein !





# More Chanukah Party Pix





# SCRAPBOOK



Susan Reuben shares this photo taken in Paris in a public park near the Seine River in October of 2017.



**Any senior members  
remember this classic  
moment?**



# Us

Rabbi Seth Riemer

Executive Committee: Sallyanne Scott, Kathi Mag, Carol Gershenson

Treasurer and Memorial Park director: Barry Goldberg

Recording Secretary: Carol Gershenson

Corresponding Secretary: Kathi Mag

Financial Secretary: Sallyanne Scott

Membership and Publicity: Karen Klein, Carol Gershenson  
and Helene Rosenblatt (FaceBook)

Friday Night Announcements: Deb Ehrlich

Conduct Board Meetings: Kathi Mag

Board of Education, Adult Education and Book Club: Cecile Bronfin

Head Instructor: Rabbi Seth Riemer

Religious Studies Instructor: Michele Cyr

Building Chair: Gary Evans

Building Committee: Dave Forrest and Kathi Mag

Gardening: Kathi Mag

The Star: Phil Lohman and Micki Bellamy

Torah Study, Building Rental, Webmaster: Deb Hammer:

Ways and Means Chair: Judy Gold

Ways and Means Committee: Rhoda London and Helene Rosenblatt

Receiving phone calls: Rhoda London

High Holiday Committee:

Rabbi Seth Riemer, Barbara Checknoff, Cecile Bronfin,

Carol Gershenson, Judy Gold, Kathi and Eliot Mag, Fred London,

Susan Reuben, Sallyanne and Barry Scott

Nominating Chair: Cecile Bronfin

Building Consultants and Miscellaneous:

Phil Lohman and Ralph Horowitz

**SPRINGTIME IS AROUND THE CORNER...**



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**Maurice Kavalier**