

***Shabbat Behar 5782 - Friday, May 20, 2022***

**Upon the Mountain**

**Tribute to Rabbi Reiser and Rabbi Levy**

First of all, I want to thank you, WRT Family, for all the care and concern you have expressed during my recovery from Covid. My blood/chicken soup level is now over the legal limit, and, more to the point, I'm testing negative.

The name of this week's Torah portion, *Behar*, means "on the mountain." Mountains figure prominently in Jewish tradition. On Mount Sinai, God gives instruction. On Mount Ararat, Noah's Ark found its shore. On Mount Nebo, Moses breathed his last. On Mount Tabor, Deborah vanquished the enemy. On the slope of Mount Zion, David built his city; On Mount Moriah, Abraham's faith was tested and, later, the great Temple would arise, Jerusalem's pride and pinnacle.

Mountains symbolize great accomplishments and noble challenges, summits attained and new vistas revealed.

So it comes as no surprise that we are making a mountain out of a moment, as we pay tribute to Rabbis David Levy and Daniel Reiser who have served our congregation with such vigor and distinction:

not only climbing the mountain of professional attainment, but, much more, guiding us in our own Jewish journeys up the mountains of faith and learning, of lifecycle celebrations and commemorations.

And if the last two years have felt especially steep and jagged, then let it be known that Rabbi Levy and Rabbi Reiser have been among our most dedicated and tireless sherpas, helping us all to carry the burden.

Each of our Associate Rabbis has distinguished himself over years of dedicated service to WRT, and, in so doing, each one has lived up to his own Biblical namesake, as I now observe in these remarks.

Consider Rabbi Daniel Reiser, who has, in so many ways, been for our community like Daniel of the Bible.

And who was Daniel of the Bible?

Well, he's a bit of an enigma, to be honest.

Was he a scholar? A prophet? A magician? An iconoclast? A charmer? A charismatic leader? He was all of these, and more; but above all, Daniel was a dreamer and a dream-interpreter. He excels in understanding and explaining arcane symbols and codes. Deciphering a mysterious script written by a ghostly hand at a feast, it is Daniel to

whom we ascribe the original phrase, “The writing on the wall” (See *Daniel*, Chapter 5).

Described as one of the handsome young Israelites (see *Daniel*, Chapter 1), Daniel comes of age during the reign of the Babylonian tyrant Nebuchadnezzar. In this time of turmoil for the Israelite people, he distinguishes himself for his wisdom and ability to navigate the perils and politics of the Babylonian court.

Rabbi Reiser came to WRT in the spring of 2016, at a time of unprecedented turmoil and tension in our community, country, and world, and it hasn’t exactly been smooth sailing ever since. For six years he has exemplified all of Daniel’s best qualities: perseverance in the face of challenges, equanimity of spirit even when put to the test, wisdom, savvy, and earnestness.

Above all, Rabbi Reiser has shown himself a masterful interpreter of our sacred texts and traditions. His leadership in adult education has brought us his insightful “Bible as Literature” class and established WRT as Westchester’s first site for the internationally esteemed Florence Melton School for Adult Jewish Learning. He has led nuanced conversations on race and racism in a Jewish context, which requires not only a depth of factual knowledge but also intellectual and emotional sensitivity.

To our families, youth, and teens, he has been a compassionate, fun, and engaging teacher and prayer-leader, unlocking for them Jewish spirituality and Torah study as relevant and enjoyable pursuits. And his artful and humane preaching and pastoring has endeared him to our entire WRT community.

We know that the congregation of Temple Beth Shalom in Hastings will be richly blessed by all these qualities, and, especially, by their new rabbi's gifts as a pastor, teacher, and interpreter of ancient wisdom.

Daniel, may you continue to live up to all the best within your name, and continue to give a good name not only for yourself, but for your loving family, for the Jewish tradition, for God, Torah, and the People of Israel. The congregation of Temple Beth Shalom is fortunate to welcome you this summer as their associate-successor rabbi, and we look forward to celebrating within the next two years when you are officially installed as that congregation's new senior rabbi, becoming only its second senior rabbi in more than 50 years.

Daniel, may you continue to reveal the mysteries and wonders of the Jewish tradition to our people and all whom you meet, inspiring them as you do.

And now a few words about Rabbi Levy's namesake. Now, all of you Bible nerds can stop worrying: I offer no ham-fisted comparison to King David, the boy warrior who slew the Philistine Goliath; the leaping dancer who embarrassed his wife by frolicking with the holy Ark in front of the Israelite throngs; or, God forbid, the power-drunk monarch who summoned Bathsheva to his chambers while plotting to have her husband killed in battle. King David is a lot of things, but a paragon of rectitude is not one of them.

So, you can all relax, because it is not to a King that our David bears closest resemblance. I refer, rather, to the *Levi*, the Biblical priest of the Israelite community, the one who was responsible for safeguarding all the holy laws, traditions, rituals, community gatherings, celebrations, bereavements, illnesses and recoveries.

The Biblical *Levi* or priest-servant was all of these things; but above all, he was a sacred caretaker for the Israelite community. It was the *Levi* who made sure that the offerings were properly prepared and presented. It was the *Levi* who organized the ritual life for the entire Israelite people, making sure that a system of norms and standards could be followed for religious life across all the tribes and their territories. It was the *Levi* who ministered to the young and the old, the sick and the frail, and who also oversaw the proper assembly and

disassembly of the Tabernacle, the wilderness tent where the people encountered God.

For the last ten years, *our* Levi, our Rabbi Levy, has been involved in almost everything that happens at WRT. His attention to detail impressed us from the very first.

When, in January 2012, I traveled to Cincinnati with WRT past president Amy Lemle and then-president Lisa Messinger to interview rabbinical candidates, David set an almost impossibly high bar for every other applicant because he showed up already versed in every aspect of WRT's history, mission, and calendar and could ask us questions about programs he had noted on our website that I didn't even know existed. The three of us were knocked out.

In 2015, our temple president Helene Gray and I initiated a Strategic Vision Process for Religious Education at WRT. Over the next two years, we collaborated with a team of lay volunteers and professional staff to re-imagine our religious school. Out of this process emerged a groundbreaking Jewish Learning Lab. And after an exhaustive search to identify a gifted educator to lead the Lab, we asked Rabbi Levy.

At first accepting the role in an interim capacity, he has now directed our JLL for six years, along the way earning recognition by the Jewish

Education Project as one of their “Young Pioneers Award” recipients for the year 2018.

Whenever confronted with an opportunity or challenge, Rabbi Levy has said, *Hineni*. “Here I am. Put me in.”

For every hour you have encountered Rabbi Levy--on a *bimah*, in a classroom, under a chuppah, at a staff meeting--he has invested countless hours in preparing. He’s been my right arm, anticipating needs and proactively addressing them. He’s the one with a podcast recommendation for every day of the week; he’s listened to all of them, on double-speed, to maximize his data intake. He’s the one who comes up with workplace efficiencies like “staff redundancy protocol.” (Ask him about that at the *Oneg*; he has a lot to say on the matter!)

Rabbi Levy has been our institutional memory: the one who remembers the child who broke her arm three years ago; the one who remembers the clergy Zoom password (the new one, after we had to change it because I messed up the old one by trying to log in with the wrong password too many times and forgetting the answer to the security question); he’s the one who remembers *Yahrzeits* and anniversaries of *B’nei Mitzvah*; who remembers the layout for *Sukkah slam* and which cantors and rabbis need to be at which services for the High Holidays.

He has, directly and indirectly, guided every student from Kindergarten to 12th grade in their journeys of Jewish education, transforming our Religious School into a vibrant Jewish Learning Lab and earning much-deserved recognition beyond the walls of WRT for his innovations in Jewish education and youth engagement, including WRT's groundbreaking partnership with BBYO. And our kids love, respect, and trust Rabbi Levy because he will never talk down to them and will never be inauthentic.

And above all, like the *Levi* of the Bible, David is a quintessential *mensch*, whose deeds exceed his speech and whose speech and deeds exemplify integrity and sincerity.

The last two years have been difficult, and we are grateful that our *Levi* has put WRT first, as he always has, even while fully devoted to his family. In this time of transition, we wish Rabbi Levy godspeed in his next engagement as the rabbi and spiritual leader of Congregation Shir Ami in Greenwich, Connecticut, a post that he will hold for the coming year. We know that any community, any congregation, that comes to know Rabbi Levy and to experience his leadership will be held with compassion, care, kindness, and fidelity. We have been honored and blessed to call you our rabbi, and *our Levi*.



Thank you, Rabbi Reiser and Rabbi Levy--Daniel and David--for carrying us up the mountain, lifting us higher in times of joy and soothing us in our most trying hours.

May each of you continue to climb the *Sinai* of a rabbinate that brings you spiritual satisfaction, health, and healing for the spiritual cuts and bruises you have sustained in the course of your time with us. May your next chapters be fulfilling, fruitful, and fun. We look forward to encountering you as you continue to lead, teach, and inspire the Jewish people in moments both lofty and lowly.

And on this *Shabbat Behar*, this Shabbat of summits attained, may God grant each of you, and your loved ones, the gift of a new vista, a new perspective, that will allow you to move forward with confidence and hope.

*Amen, Shabbat Shalom*