



# BETH EL NEWSLETTER

## The Heights Synagogue

January 2021  
5781 טבת / שבט



RABBI  
MICHAEL UNGAR

**New Year,  
new luck?  
It will not  
happen on  
its own.  
Please  
join in  
the effort  
to make  
2021 a  
year of  
peace,  
health,  
justice,  
and love.**

## 2020 Is Over!

2020, the secular year we just completed has been like no other. The COVID-19 pandemic. Nationwide demonstrations for racial justice. A presidential election. Not to mention all the natural disasters and deaths of many important individuals. I, like many others, could not wait for 2020 to be over.

There is an expression in Hebrew: *Mishaneh makom, mishaneh mazal*, “change [your] place, and change [your] luck.” I keep hoping that 2021 will be a case of change our year, change our luck. Of course, it is never really quite that simple. It is true that moving to a new place, a new job, or a new school does often change a person’s trajectory; more often than not, though, there are other factors at work as well. Our tradition teaches us that we have free will; it is not “the fates” that determine our fate, but rather ourselves. Yes, God has a role to play, but even the sages acknowledged that God has control over everything except for the fear of God. Just as a parent is never fully in control of a child, God is never fully in control of us. We are responsible for our actions.

As we make our way into 2021, we should not be fooled into thinking that because it is a new year, with (God-willing) effective vaccines and a new President, that suddenly everything will be coming up roses and daffodils. Most of the problems of 2020 (and even earlier) will follow us into this new secular year.

Is this a reason to despair? Not at all! Just as we recognize at Rosh Hashanah, the past is ever-present. We cannot wish it away. What we can do, is move forward in a different way than in the past. A new year is a time to consider what has transpired and to plan for a better path forward.

I am thrilled that 2020 is coming to an end. I am hopeful for 2021, but I know that hope is not enough. All of us need to remember the hard work and goodwill that can bring us to a better place. New Year, new luck? It will not happen on its own. Please join in the effort to make 2021 a year of peace, health, justice, and love.

Rabbi Ungar

Beth El - The Heights Synagogue builds vibrant Jewish community.  
We welcome all in participatory, traditional, egalitarian worship and learning.

Saturday Morning Services at 9:15 ♦ 3246 Desota Ave., Cleveland Hts., OH 44118 ♦ ☎216-320-9667

## Co-PRESIDENTS



JOEL GENUTH



BUD STERN

### Contact Information

QUESTIONS? CONCERNS?  
COMMENTS? COMPLAINTS?  
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(216) 320-9667

KEEP UP WITH THE NEWS!  
JOIN THE  
BE-THS LISTS!  
Send an e-mail to  
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if you need help with  
signing up.

# When Did Jews Become Monotheists?

We interrupt reflections on life in the pandemic -- the principal use of this space the last several months -- for some old-fashioned historicizing and theologizing. The pandemic, we can now reasonably hope, will abate during 2021.

Article titles these days are ideally both attention-grabbing and informative. This article's title errs on the side of attention-grabbing and achieves its aim by lacking information on its two nouns: how does one define "Jews" and "monotheism?" And those questions presuppose the more elemental question: what is the foundation for a definition?

We like to believe that in important senses we are who we were and were who we are. I believe there is but one God with whom I have a direct relationship and those who believe (or believed) in a multiplicity of gods are (or were) deceiving themselves. So, I want to believe that was the faith of the patriarchs and matriarchs and their descendants, my ancestors, going forward. I can boil down that sentiment into a time-free, comforting tautology: Jews are by definition monotheists, and if one isn't a monotheist, then one isn't a Jew.

But those pesky historians -- and I was trained as one and once earned a living in the trade -- insist on looking at the past for knowledge about human beings and their situations even though every-

one (including historians) in everyday life mostly looks to the past for information that can justify or inspire actions in the present. The tautology quickly breaks down when one looks at how people lived and interacted in what is to us the ancient world. Overwhelmingly, to quote one historian, "connections between heaven and earth [in the ancient world] ran precisely along ethnic or 'family' lines. That is, particular gods were the particular concern of a particular 'people,' 'race,' 'family,' 'clan,' or 'descent group,' a transtemporal, inter-generational kinship unit constructed by notions of shared 'blood.'" Even what we call our basic profession of monotheism, the *Sh'ma*, makes room for our ancestors to accept the existence of other people's god if one emphasizes "our" as in "Adonai is our God." And if one ignores the inhibitions about using "God's name," the statement becomes even more parochial: "Y--h is our God." Put those words in the mouth of an Israelite circa 800 BCE and it's easy to imagine them as a statement of fact, not faith, to which we can then add "Baal is the Canaanite's God," "An is the Babylonian's God," "Zeus is the Greek's God," etc. Indeed, 19th century scholars coined the terms "henotheism" and "monolatry" to try to capture the reality of Israelites and then Judeans peaceably accepting that other people had real gods with whom they were obliged to maintain healthy relationships.

The rub, as Hamlet might have said, came when conditions were both hostile and adverse. Our ancestors could comfortably assert Y--h's superiority to gods embodied in idols when Y--h was plaguing the Egyptians, executing judgement on their gods (who had to exist in order to have judgement executed on them), and supporting the Israelites in victorious battles to take control of the covenanted land. But if those were Y--h's doings, then why shouldn't the events of 586 BCE (and 721 BCE before then) be properly interpreted as An, the Babylonian's chief god, kicking Y--h's (metaphoric) butt? Perhaps that interpretation is behind the descendants of the Samaritan tribes mostly losing their faith and adopting other group identities. The Judean prophets, however, found a compelling narrative that preserved both the covenant and Y--h's superiority. 586 BCE was not Y--h losing to An but Y--h using the Babylonians to punish the Judeans for their inadequacies in worshipping Y--h, and Y--h, having made a covenant with the descendants of the patriarchs and matriarchs, will someday send a Messiah to restore the Davidic kingdom in Judea and inspire all peoples to acknowledge Y--h as humanity's ultimate sovereign. The Judeans, we all know, did return to Judea and managed to maintain their identity and Mosaic ways within a string of empires. But relations with the Romans in the first century CE were so fraught and generated such yearnings for the Messianic age that the Romans destroyed the Temple in 70 CE and, following their defeat of Bar Kochba in 135 CE, ended Judea's existence as an administrative territory associated with a majority population that worshiped its particular god in its particularly non-idolatrous way. (Let's leave modern Zionism and Palestinian nationalism aside.)

Should we call first century CE Judeans sacrificing animals at the Temple monotheists? What of Judeans who willingly left Judea for other parts of the Hellenic world where they made livings and founded synagogues? Emphatically, they were all not idolaters. Emphatically, those outside Judea felt obliged to keep their relationship with Y--h. Emphatically, they considered Y--h to be superior to all

other immortal entities posited in their scriptures. But a universal god? And the only being worth calling a god? Not likely. As best I can tell, in the 50s and 60s CE, when Paul of Tarsus, a well-educated child of the Judean Diaspora, began calling on Gentiles to prepare for the impending Messianic Age by abandoning their gods for Y--h but to worship Y--h as Gentiles rather than becoming Judeans, he made more enemies than friends among Gentile authorities, among Judeans generally, and even among his Judean fellow travelers in the Jesus movement. His contemporaries preferred that Y--h remain the Judeans' god, that the Gentiles honor their gods, and that Gentile men who wanted to worship Y--h exclusively become Judean by subjecting themselves to Mosaic law, especially the rigors of adult circumcision. When 250 years later, the Jesus movement had so many Gentile followers to be a social force for Gentile authorities to reckon with (despite the fact that Jesus's "impending" return would at the earliest be 300 years after his death), they organized as an independent religion that at least deemphasized, if not outright denigrated, its origins in Mosaic Y--h worship.

I call myself Jewish, not Judean. At least as a starting point, I'm happy with the "narrow" definition of monotheism presented in Wikipedia on the basis of several religious encyclopedias: "belief in the existence of only one god that created the world, is omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient, and intervenes in the world." And of course, the second half of the *Sh'ma* proclaims that Y--h is one. But I doubt that my sense of God's oneness lines up all that well with what the authors of Deuteronomy meant or what the rabbis of the first two centuries CE meant. I sure do enjoy discussing and thinking about Jewish scriptures and commentaries in contemporary contexts, but the contemporary contexts probably have more to do with my sense of God and monotheism than the meanings of the words of the Jewish Bible as used by its authors and interpreted by sages before the rise of Christianity.

Joel Genuth, Co-President

# NEWS FROM BETH EL

# חדשות

## Condolences to:

ניחום אבלים

**Bud Stern**, whose mother, Mildred Fieldman Stern, passed away in Chicago in late November at the advanced age of 106.

## Refuah Sh'lema to:

רפואה שלימה!

- Marsha Katz
- Miriam Palevsky
- Ieda Warshay

## Thanks for Contributions to:

תודה!

- **Rabbi Moshe Adler**, in memory of Yehuda Leib Shultz-Shallit z"l.
- **Sherry Ball and Marty Gelfand**, in memory of Marty's uncle, Sanford Gelfand z"l.
- **Matthew and Natalie Barratt**, in memory of Emilia Nadel McGucken z"l.
- **Molly Brudnick**, towards membership in Greater Cleveland Congregations.
- **Molly Brudnick**, in memory of Bud Stern's mother, Mildred Fieldman Stern z"l.
- **Bill and Carol Bruml**, in memory of Bud Stern's mother, Mildred Fieldman Stern z"l.
- **Bill and Carol Bruml**
- **Bill and Carol Bruml**, in memory of Bill's father, Charles Robert Bruml z"l.
- **Bill and Carol Bruml**, to cover cost of logo in "Source" listing for 2021.

- **Stephanie Gordon**
- **Gabrielle Millas**, in memory of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l.
- **Gabrielle Millas**, in memory of Bud's mother. May her name be a blessing.
- **Gabrielle Millas**, in memory of Stacia Dearmin's father, Robert Dearmin z"l.
- **Stephen Pepper and Linda Tobin**, in memory of Bud Stern's mother, Mildred Fieldman Stern z"l.
- **Adam and Samantha Probst**
- **Ilana and William Schmitt**
- **Eran Shiloh**, to the Presidents' Discretionary Fund.
- **Barry Starr**
- **Michael Steklof**
- **Bud Stern**, in memory of Dr. Jack Stern z"l.
- **Lenny Tracht**
- **Marsha Weisberg**, in honor of Sonny Kugelman's marriage.
- **Marsha Weisberg**, in memory of Sidney Weisberg z"l.
- **Marsha Weisberg**, in memory of Miriam Weisberg z"l.
- **Marsha Weisberg**, in memory of Daniel Weisberg z"l.
- **Marsha Weisberg**, in memory of Bertha Weisberg z"l.
- **Marsha Weisberg**, in memory of Phillip Samuels z"l.

## Winter Clothing Drive

Since the Heights schools are still operating remotely, our usual clothing drive in support of the clothing pantry at Noble School can't happen. However, Beth Wachter found an alternative: the Cleveland Chesed Center is accepting donations of outerwear, footwear, clothing, socks. They serve the community in our neighborhood, Jewish and non-Jewish alike. They are also looking for volunteers who might be willing to assist or be on call to assist with delivery of donations to families in need. The Chesed Center is located near Hebrew Academy, at 1898 South Taylor, in the Vanderbrook Building. The manager is Meira Friedman at 216-932-3115 or [mfriedman@clevelandchesedcenter.org](mailto:mfriedman@clevelandchesedcenter.org). Meira said they can particularly use children's winter boots, socks, and boys' pants for school, sizes 6-12. Here is a link for their Amazon wishlist with more details, <https://tinyurl.com/y27bd4mt>. Due to COVID, they are not letting people into their building. If you wish to drop off donations, they ask you to please call them first. They will have a cart or box outside waiting and a staff person will watch for you so they can retrieve the donation immediately.

# CALENDAR, JANUARY 2021

5781 שבט / טבת

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 30

7:30 AM – Full Moon Tevet walking meditation

SATURDAY, JANUARY 2 – Parashat Vayishlach

10:00 AM – Shabbat morning services via Zoom

SATURDAY, JANUARY 9

**No in-person services.** The Board will revisit this at our January 11 meeting, but while the incidence of COVID remains so extremely high, locally, we will not meet in person.

SUNDAY, JANUARY 10

1:30 – 2:30 PM – **Book discussion with Rabbi Ungar via Zoom.** If you wish to join the group and have not already been participating, contact Rabbi Ungar, [rabbi@bethelheights.org](mailto:rabbi@bethelheights.org), to be added to the list.

7:00 – 8:00 pm – **Midrash study group**, led on alternating sessions by Rabbi Ungar or Rabbi Starr, via Zoom. If you wish to join the group and have not already been participating, contact Rabbi Ungar, [rabbi@bethelheights.org](mailto:rabbi@bethelheights.org), to be added to the list.

THURSDAY, JANUARY 14

7:30 AM – Rosh Chodesh Sh'vat walking meditation

SATURDAY, JANUARY 16 – Parashat Miketz

10:00 AM – Shabbat morning services via Zoom

THURSDAY, JANUARY 21

7:00 PM – **Claudio Saunt will lecture entitled, “Indian Removal and Mass Deportation in the Modern Era,”** through the Siegal Lifelong Learning Program. See page 6 for registration information.

SATURDAY, JANUARY 23

**To be decided. See January 9.**

SUNDAY, JANUARY 24

7:00 – 8:00 PM – **Midrash study group**, led on alternating sessions by Rabbi Ungar or Rabbi Starr, via Zoom. If you wish to join the group and have not already been participating, contact Rabbi Ungar, [rabbi@bethelheights.org](mailto:rabbi@bethelheights.org), to be added to the list.

THURSDAY, JANUARY 28

7:30 AM – Full Moon Sh'vat walking meditation

SATURDAY, JANUARY 30

**To be decided. See January 9.**

**Our MLK Day Food Drive will last the whole month of January!**

Please send cash donation to the Heights Emergency Food Center, 3663 Mayfield Road, Cleveland Heights, OH 44121.

Clearly note that your check is for the BE–THS MLK Food Drive, so we get credit for the donation.

Note that, due to COVID, the Heights Emergency Food Center is not accepting donations of food or other in-kind items at this time.

# Yahrzeits, January 2021

## Tevet ~ טבת

Edward Buckwald	17 Tevet 5779
Morton Glaser	18 Tevet 5750
Annie Moll	18 Tevet 5761
Louis Shifrin	18 Tevet 5727
Tamar Tepper	18 Tevet
Sandy Cantleberry	19 Tevet 5765
Fannie Eisenberg	19 Tevet 5733
Jack Gordon	19 Tevet
Jacques R. Simons	20 Tevet 5739
Steve Cernigoj	20 Tevet
Samuel Soffer	21 Tevet
Charlotte Hope Saltzman	
	22 Tevet 5765
Linda Robinson	23 Tevet 5767
Fannie Fromson	23 Tevet 5717
Lillian Ratner	23 Tevet
Celia Sobel	23 Tevet
Dora Tracht	24 Tevet
Janet Davidson	24 Tevet 5780
Charles Robert Brumml	25 Tevet 5755
Joe Silver	25 Tevet 5733
Sylvia Tucker	25 Tevet
Rosalyn Louise Berkman	
	26 Tevet 5758
Morris Givertz	27 Tevet
Joseph Savino	28 Tevet
Seth Lettofsky	28 Tevet 5777
Alfred Adler	28 Tevet 5751
Louis Jacobs	29 Tevet 5730
Henry Gelfand	29 Tevet

## Sh'vat ~ שבט

Mary Lucita Ball	1 Sh'vat 5772
Harriet Feldman	2 Sh'vat
Heinz Gelles	2 Sh'vat 5773
Victor Reiss	3 Sh'vat
Theresa Siegler	3 Sh'vat
David Carr	3 Sh'vat
Mordechai Lugasy	4 Sh'vat
Rudolph Landesman	6 Sh'vat
Ziskind Alex Simon	6 Sh'vat
Isaac Bruder	7 Sh'vat
Eugene Goodman	7 Sh'vat
Ethel Newman	7 Sh'vat
Leon Stern	9 Sh'vat
Max Fromson	10 Sh'vat
Blumi Zavelowitz	10 Sh'vat
Louis Sobelman	11 Sh'vat
Dorothy Neuger	11 Sh'vat
Jacob Wilkenfeld	13 Sh'vat
Fannie Levine	13 Sh'vat
Pinkas Zavell	13 Sh'vat
Sonny Lerner	14 Sh'vat
Marilyn Protus Fischer	16 Sh'vat 5748
Mary Malkin	17 Sh'vat
Madelyn Palevsky	17 Sh'vat 5770
Julius Kammen	17 Sh'vat 5707
Charles Auerbach	17 Sh'vat
Isadore Fromson	17 Sh'vat
Anna Genuth	18 Sh'vat
Beatrice Schweickert	18 Sh'vat 5757
David Muszynski	18 Sh'vat
Gayle Kuhr Sharpe	18 Sh'vat

## Claudio Saunt to Speak on Indian Removal and Mass Deportation

Honey Massey's nephew, Claudio Saunt, will give a lecture on Thursday, January 21, at 7:00 PM through the Siegal Lifelong Learning Program, entitled "Indian Removal and Mass Deportation in the Modern Era" (via Zoom). Explore the history of Indian Removal in the context of other mass deportations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Join Professor Saunt to look at the US-sponsored expulsion of the Indian population in the 1830s forcing them westward, creating something of a model for colonial empires around the world including the infamous deportations of World War II. Notoriously, during the Nazi conquest of Eastern Europe, Hitler equated "indigenous inhabitants" with "Indians" and declared "the Volga River must be our Mississippi." This lecture is offered in conjunction with Beth El –The Heights Synagogue. Cost \$5 for members, \$10 for non-members; register at <https://www.lifelonglearningcleveland.org/public/Course/browse?courseid=26778>.

# You can change lives !

We want to stretch your dollars to make the biggest impact possible.



We at BE-THS want to continue our tradition of sponsoring an annual MLK Day food drive to help support the Heights Emergency Food Center. This year, because of the COVID pandemic, the Food Center is not accepting food donations; instead they request financial assistance, so they can continue to help needy families in the Heights area.

They are able to *stretch* our dollars so that every dollar we contribute will buy four meals!

Please send checks clearly earmarked that they are for the BE-THS MLK Food Drive to the Heights Emergency Food Center, 3663 Mayfield Road, Cleveland, OH 44121, between January 1 and January 30.



**Food Banks Need Our Help!**