

“Transcend the Ordinary”

Adar - Nisan - Iyar - Sivan 5785  
March 2025 - May 2025

**UPSIDE-DOWN WORLD**

By CANTOR SHARON BERNSTEIN



One of my love/hate objects is a Perplexus toy. It’s a transparent sphere containing a 3-dimensional marble maze. It’s **HARD**. You have to contort the sphere (and your arms and your head and your neck) to try and get the teensy-weensy metal ball to go the right way on the teensy-weensy track. Any mis-twist, and the ball falls off and you have to start over again. It’s kind of stressful, but also relaxing and fun, strange as that sounds.

I was thinking about the Perplexus around the upcoming Purim holiday. Purim is often referred to as “*hafuch*” – upside down. It comes from the line in the megillah: *v’nahafoch hu* – referring to how, at the end of the story, the tables were turned, and what the enemies had planned for the Jews ended up happening to the enemies themselves. The upside-down-ness of Purim can be expressed in many ways, such as dressing up as one’s alter ego, or

doing the service backwards, but there’s also a seriousness to it: a challenging of norms, of playing with identity, of doing things differently just for the sake of it.

There’s a reference to an upside-down world in the Talmud. Someone who has returned from the brink of death is asked what they saw, and they say: “I saw an inverted world (*olam hafuch*). Those above were below, and those below were above.” The Rabbis saw this as an interpretation of how the importance or standing of people in this world would shift in the world to come. But I think it’s also about how things can shift in a reflection, and what we can see and learn in that.

Sometimes we choose to turn our world upside down, explore possibilities that lie within the underbelly of what we’ve been living. And sometimes the world is turned upside down on us, and we have to try and figure out a way to live within it and/or turn it right side up again. And, often, it’s something in between; the world within us and outside of us shifting, and constantly making adaptations.

The Rabbis of the Talmud were very focused on the differentiations between the world of now and the world to come. Maybe we don’t need to live in such either-or parameters. The world is often not right-side-up or upside-down, but lightly tilting in different directions, like the Perplexus, with repeated attempts to send the ball on its path. And also with ourselves – maybe we can be both ourselves and the upside down version of ourselves at the same time, and thus make all worlds possible.

**WELCOME  
HOME**

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By MIKE SHRIVER



I want to tell you more about something I touched on in my message in the last JGF: our Sha'ar Zahav school, Beit Sefer Phyllis Mintzer (BSPM). Over the course of my last ten years at SZ, before I became President of the Va'ad in July 2024, I probably attended a handful of events, activities, and programs put on by our remarkable Beit Sefer community. I still recall sitting in the Oneg Room downstairs watching, in awe, the video histories our students created to honor Irene Ogus and Allan Gold - not just in awe of the stories recorded and preserved, but also in awe of the brilliance of our students' work. I also have this indelible memory of the Tower of Babel constructions the students made, stretching from floor to ceiling, balancing precariously.

One of my commitments as President is to become more involved in BSPM. I was invited to attend the first day of class for this year, not knowing what to expect when I attended my first Morning Circle (the opening ritual for the entirety of Beit Sefer) led by our excellent Educator, Rabbi Q. Since then, I have gone to several Morning Circles and our fantastic pre-Chanukah program and have had the privilege of witnessing incredible B'nei Mitzvahs.

Sitting on a Saturday morning with the BSPM parents and students brings me such joy. This community is vibrant, loving, and diverse. My hope for the shul is that we continue to build on this beautiful and important part of our congregation. Between our amazing staff (including Rabbi Q, Ila Cherney, Andrea Guerra, Marty Rawlings-Fein) and our excellent *madrichimot* (teen helpers), the future of Sha'ar Zahav is in capable, loving hands. And that really gives me such hope for our future.

## Sha'ar Zahav

290 Dolores Street  
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**VOICE** 415-861-6932

**WEB** <https://www.shaarzahav.org>

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[rabbi@shaarzahav.org](mailto:rabbi@shaarzahav.org)  
Cantor Sharon Bernstein (she/her)  
[cantorbernstein@gmail.com](mailto:cantorbernstein@gmail.com)

### EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Danny Shapiro (he/him)  
[danny@shaarzahav.org](mailto:danny@shaarzahav.org)

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Rabbi Q (Lisa Levenberg, she/her)  
[educator@shaarzahav.org](mailto:educator@shaarzahav.org)

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Kerasa Tsokas (she/her)  
[kerasa@shaarzahav.org](mailto:kerasa@shaarzahav.org)

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[rabbireuben@shaarzahav.org](mailto:rabbireuben@shaarzahav.org)

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By DANNY SHAPIRO



Writing a column in January for a newsletter that reaches you in March feels daunting. The pace of change is dizzying: wars, ceasefires, hostage negotiations, executive orders, Congressional bills - and our community faces its own challenges of grief and loss. Amid this

turmoil, I recall a lesson from my University of Haifa professor, Yosef Leibowitz, about two biblical conceptions of time: linear time progresses from Creation through the Exodus, revelation, exile, and toward the Messianic age. Cyclical time, however, appears in life cycles and holidays, where we reenact history and return to rituals that anchor us amid the storms of linear time. When linear time feels overwhelming, I find comfort in these cyclical rhythms that invite us to pause, reflect, and reconnect.

At Sha'ar Zahav, we live in both linear and cyclical time. Our congregation has a history, from our founding through the present, and into aspirations for the future. Yet we build that future through the sustaining cycles of our holidays, rituals, and Va'ad calendar. For me, this also includes our holiday programming and our fundraising efforts.

As we enter spring, I want to take a moment to thank everyone who has participated in our Rainbow Campaign. If you haven't yet had the chance to give, please reach out to me—I'd love to chat, or even grab coffee and discuss how you can contribute.

Spring also brings the joy of Purim and Passover, with Pride just around the corner. These moments of celebration and connection remind us of the strength we find in community and tradition. Let's anchor ourselves in our cyclical time, even as the world's linear story continues to unfold. Together, we can find meaning and resilience in both the challenges and the joys ahead.

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To reach the JGF editorial team:  
[jgf@shaarzahav.org](mailto:jgf@shaarzahav.org)

### DESIGN AND LAYOUT

Hien Nguyen: [hien.h.nguyen@hotmail.com](mailto:hien.h.nguyen@hotmail.com)

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## INTERGENERATIONAL CONNECTIONS

By RABBI Q

The spirit of mentorship and intergenerational connection has been a core part of Sha'ar Zahav's ethos from its inception. Whereas most synagogues offer staff-led courses and tutoring programs, both our adult conversion students and our B'Mitzvah youth are matched with congregational mentors. This one-to-one approach has been strengthening the bonds within our community long before "relational Judaism" was a modern watchword.

In addition to long standing traditions like the mentor program and our Pride Seder, we continue to find new ways to foster understanding between older and younger folks. For example, we are working with Keshet and the JCCSF on an Intergenerational Dinner, in which queer elders, teens, and everyone in between will participate

in dialogue about their experiences.

On a smaller scale, some of our Chavurot are pairing up with each other to create unique events and find fresh perspectives. Last month, the Baby Chavurah teamed up with the Climate Action Committee for a Tu Bishvat program, doing community service at Alemany Farm. Sarah Klevan, a Baby Chavurah organizer, commented, "I hope that my little ones (6 and 2 years old) will form lasting relationships with not only their peers but also adult members who can be part of their circle of aunties, uncles, and extended family. I also aspire to have friends of many ages; it's one of the primary reasons I joined Sha'ar Zahav!"

## SHA'AR ZAHAV MEET THE B'MITZVAH

### Z Harris-Taylor



Z Bayard Cronin Harris-Taylor, child of Sasha Harris-Cronin and Nyx Taylor, will be called to the Torah as a b'mitzvah on May 17th.

Z lives in the Mission in SF and is a seventh grader at James Lick Middle School. He loves acting, books, cats, and art. He especially loves drawing comics and being a dungeon master for his friends at school. When not doing any of those, he can usually be found cooking with his mama or playing video games with his baba.

Z is very thankful for his community and teachers at Beit Sefer and his mentors, including Stuart Dick, Andréa Guerra, Rabbi Mychal, and Leah Hammond.

## SHA'AR ZAHAV COMMITTEES

### WELCOME HOME

By RABBI REUBEN ZELLMAN

What a blessing to return to Sha'ar Zahav! From 2006-2010 I served this congregation as rabbinical student intern, and now direct our Welcome Home Project.

SZ initiated the Welcome Home Project at the beginning of 2024 to honor two beloved members, Paul Cohen z"l and Ray Bernstein z"l, who were deeply committed to creating a welcoming and safe Jewish space for every person. This project increases our capacity in two areas. One is our Journey to Judaism (conversion) program; the other is addressing the needs and lifting up the voices of our transgender, intersex and non-binary community.

The Journey to Judaism program has been a long-time success thanks to Paul's leadership and the efforts of dedicated volunteers. These volunteer teachers are continuing their work, leading discussion groups, planning events and individually mentoring each person. I support

them and I coordinate administration and ritual. As far as our trans community – what a time we're living in. Trans visibility and culture are rapidly and joyfully growing, while an ugly backlash threatens us daily. Listening to the community this year, I've heard three consistent needs and hopes. One, we want to be in the center of the great creativity and expansion that trans/non-binary lives are bringing to Judaism. Two, we want to harness the power of our entire community to oppose transphobia and save lives. And three, we want SZ to serve as a refuge, offering supportive, joyful spaces to trans people, non-Jewish and Jewish alike. We're now offering several programs to respond to these needs, including Trans Together

(for trans/non-binary folks only) and TJIF (Trans Justice It's Friday - community-wide justice action before Shabbat). I develop our programs with our TGNC (Trans - Gender Non-Conforming) Planning Team, chaired by Martin Rawlings-Fein. (Interested in the planning team? Let us know!)

Although Welcome Home focuses on two areas, my constant goal is the good and the growth of our entire congregation. If you'd like to be in contact with ideas or questions, I'd love to hear from you. And to all of you whose vision and efforts have made it possible for me to do this work, here in this community I love: thank you.

## PENINSULA/SOUTH BAY B'YACHAD NEIGHBORHOOD GOING STRONG

By JAN HALF, CO-COORDINATOR

*B'Yachad* (together/unity) Neighborhoods began in June of 2021, to help build community with Sha'ar Zahav members in our local neighborhoods. The Peninsula/South Bay Neighborhood covers a 50+ mile area including 15 cities south and east of Sha'ar Zahav. Rabbi Mychal Copeland is one of our members, and we are so fortunate that she and her wife, Kirsti, host gatherings in their backyard. Rabbi Copeland also invites other Sha'ar Zahav members from San Francisco and other cities to attend.

Fifteen to twenty of us have been meeting two times a year for nearly four years, usually in the summer and in the fall around Sukkot. Jeff Levin, from San Jose, says, "at each event we've had the opportunity to meet new and fabulous people." Joel Lachter, of Mountain View, notes "it's hard to get to events in San Francisco, so going to gatherings on the peninsula is much appreciated." With this enthusiasm, our Peninsula/South Bay *B'Yachad* Neighborhood gatherings are sure to continue to create and foster community for many years.



*Pictured (left to right): Marisa Guerro, Nico Rosenstone, their son Goel, Steve Elman, Deb Cohler, Jan Half, Frank Yellin, Rabbi Copeland, Christopher Archuleta, Bill Goldstein, Sharyn Saslafsky, Joel Lachter, Jeff Levin, Jill Ludwig.*

*Photo credit: Jonah Copeland, July 2021*

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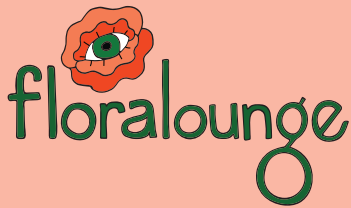
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*Megillah Madness Purim play, 1985: Steve Elman and Allan Gold dancing*



*Purim 2024 (left to right): David Steinwedel, Michael Chasnow, Geetika Agrawal, Megan Steinwedel. Photo by Liz Jaroslow*