

THE QUARTERLY MAGAZINE OF BETH CHAYIM CHADASHIM

# G V A N I M

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# BCC AND A MORE WHOLE ME

BY JESSICA DONATH, PRESIDENT



*When my predecessor as president, Brett Trueman, told me that he was resigning at the end of 2022, I had a mild freakout moment. Actually, several moments, some of them not so mild. I didn't feel ready to take on this role and do it well. And I wasn't sure if it was a*

*good idea for a straight cisgender person to become president of the first synagogue founded by and for gay and lesbian Jews. Since I shared my doubts in a letter to the congregation, I have received positive and encouraging feedback from several members. I'm very grateful for the support. In this essay, adapted from a sermon I delivered in November 2020, I share a little of the backstory of how I found BCC and what it means to me.*

I MET BCC'S RABBI EMERITA LISA EDWARDS WHEN I WAS A GRADUATE STUDENT IN JOURNALISM SCHOOL AT USC, and she was still BCC's rabbi. I interviewed her about the state of affairs two years after Prop 8 for a Valentine's Day story. Before this conversation, I had not spent much time thinking about sexual orientation or gender identity and Judaism or the role of women in Judaism. Before this chance encounter, I had mostly made peace with the realization that I might never figure out how to successfully integrate my German and Jewish identities into one authentic and meaningful life.

I grew up near Frankfurt, Germany, in the eighties and nineties. My mother is a mildly observant Protestant, and my father an atheist Jew. I learned a lot about Jewish customs and holidays from my mother. She read books to educate herself about the culture and religion she married into. My dad's parents, who survived the Holocaust, disapproved of their relationship. To appease her less-than-welcoming future in-laws, my mom agreed that any future children would not be baptized but would be allowed to choose their religion.

For reasons I can't quite put my finger on,

Christianity never spoke to me as Judaism did. (Christian) religion lessons are mandatory in Germany, just like algebra and history. As soon as I was old enough to take myself there by bus and subway, I opted out and enrolled in the religious school of the synagogue in Frankfurt.

My newfound religious freedom came with an added benefit: I got to sleep an hour longer than my classmates twice a week because religion was the first period of the day. It also earned me the ire of my classmates who had no choice. When I was five or six, my dad and I began to attend High Holiday services at the regal, golden-domed synagogue in Frankfurt's Westend, an upscale part of the city that used to boast a large percentage of Jewish residents. I went upstairs with my Jewish friends and their mothers. My dad stayed downstairs.

I loved being upstairs! I felt as independent as a five or six-year-old can feel. I also felt more important than my dad and the other men because I got to be higher up. Most years, my dad in the pews below, and I on the balcony looking down, we listened to a sermon by a very angry Orthodox rabbi. He railed against everything my family represented: assimilation, intermarriage, and the lack of kashrut observance. He said it's our fault that the Messiah isn't coming.

When I was 16, I went on a high school trip to East Germany. During a visit to the remnants of the Buchenwald concentration camp near Weimar, one of my teachers told me that she had recently decided to renovate the farmhouse she inherited from her parents in the bucolic Odenwald region, about 45 minutes from Frankfurt. While she cleaned out the attic, she found a military helmet that belonged to her father, who had been a soldier in the Wehrmacht and a member of one of the last groups of prisoners of war that returned to Germany from the Soviet Union in the 1950s.

My teacher had no memory of her father that predated his return and subsequent introduction as her father and instant head of the household. The former soldier did not talk about his experiences during the war. My teacher filled this vacuum with her imagination and began to feel guilty for him.

As we walked across a field that the concen-

tration camp guards used for morning roll calls, she apologized to me, her 16-year-old student, for everything her father's generation had done to the Jews. She had decided that Germans were guilty and that I was Jewish or at least Jewish enough to receive her apology.

I left Germany when I was 27 to study and live in Prague for a year. After a brief return home to complete coursework at the university, I moved to LA. My chance encounter with Rabbi Lisa and BCC opened the door for me to a more complete, integrated, and authentic life. Over the past ten or so years, I learned more about BCC's history and understood why synagogues that serve LGBTQIA+ people were necessary in 1972 when BCC was founded and why they are necessary now. It helped me tremendously to meet people who model what it looks and feels like to successfully marry parts of one's identity that others (or oneself) might deem incompatible.

For example, I am now permitting myself to welcome Shabbat with joy, candles, homemade challah, and pizza in our proudly mixed Italian, Canadian, German-Jewish family. My Jewish children attend religious school and speak German, which they practice when we visit my homeland. I look forward to learning more from BCCers and to giving back to the community that made it possible for me to be my whole self.

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## SUBMISSIONS WELCOME

We welcome you to contribute to this magazine! Here are some ideas to get your creative juices flowing. Have you recently attended an amazing (virtual) event or art exhibit? Did you read a book or watch a TV show that everyone should know about? Do you have an idea for a new column? Do you think your bubbe has the best rugelach recipe? Please be in touch, we can't wait to hear from you!

### Please follow these submission guidelines:

- Articles should be more than 500 words, letters to the editor can be shorter
- Please do not write about officeholders, candidates, or general international, national, state, or local political issues.
- Be respectful of anyone you reference, directly or indirectly, by name or anonymously.
- Please do not advertise any product or service in an article or letter.
- Submissions should be sent by email to the editorial team at [gvanim@bcc-la.org](mailto:gvanim@bcc-la.org) as a Word attachment, in the body of the email, or as a Google doc.
- Include your name and phone number.
- All submissions will be proofread and edited for length, clarity, style, and tone.
- Note: Late submissions may not be considered for publication.
- Deadlines will be published in the BCC Weekly News and Updates.

# DESIRES AND NEEDS IN A TIME OF TRANSITION

BY CANTOR JUVAL PORAT



*Editor's Note: As most readers of G'vanim know, Cantor Juval Porat will be leaving BCC for a new position in June. His farewell announcement to the congregation is reprinted below this article.*

*He will be greatly missed, but we wish him well in his future endeavors.*

The Talmud tells us that in the world to come, everyone will be called to account for all the desires they might have fulfilled in this world but chose not to. The things we desire - the desires themselves - are sacred. Who put them in our hearts if not God? But we have been taught to be ashamed of what we want; our desires become horribly distorted and cause us to do terribly hurtful things.

—Rabbi Alan Lew, from “This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared”

WHAT IMAGES DOES THE WORD “NEED” EVOKE IN YOU? When you think about yourself having needs, what is your reaction? When you think about others having needs, what is your reaction? Do you equate having needs with powerlessness? With lack? Do you equate not having needs with strength, wholeness and self-sufficiency?

These days I've been thinking about our desires and needs. I've been thinking how in our culture and society, as powerfully evident in the word “neediness,” it seems that having a need carries a sense of denial and shame, a desire to ignore or suppress our needs so as not to appear “needy” to others.

How fortunate it is to find other perspectives from our tradition on the topic of “needs.” Rabbi Lew's quote above suggests needs might be a core expression of our humanity and of life - maybe even divinity itself. Isn't that a wonderful thing? To be connected with our needs as a universal energy that we have in common with all of humankind?

Although we may choose different strategies to meet the need, the experience of the need itself is common and similar for all of us. Every experience of having a need can be an opportunity to be in unity with the rest of humanity.

I'm reminding myself of that insight at this time of transition - saying goodbye to all of BCC's beloved community that I had the pleasure of knowing and serving over the past 13 years, and preparing for my new chapter in Miami Beach. Naturally, I'm filled with excitement and anxiety, fear and hope, sadness and delight, nervousness and calm. Who wouldn't be? I can only guess the same feelings are alive within some of you, as you imagine BCC's future.

I hope and pray that we can all see whatever challenges we might face at this time of transition - stimulated by other people's and our own actions, expressions and behaviors - as attempts (some more wholesome, some more tragic) to meet our needs. I hope we can all cultivate the ability of seeing the beautiful humanity underlying those actions and expressions.

Mamnun/ممنون - A word from the Islamic tradition, often translated as “thankful as a state of being” is another practice I hope to inhabit, as I receive the gift of other people's needs with the opportunity to engage, contribute and make oth-

er people's lives more beautiful.

Thank you for the outreach of so many of you so far! I hope I get to connect with you in the months to come. It has meant so much to me to know that my contributions have made a positive

impact on you and I'm forever grateful for that knowledge.

B'shalom,  
Cantor Juval

January 10, 2023

Dear beloved Beth Chayim Chadashim community,

With mixed emotions, I want to let you know that I have decided to accept a position at Temple Beth Shalom of Miami Beach, which will begin in June 2023. This decision comes after years of wondering what other areas of growth and expansion could be part of my cantorate. Over the next few months, of course, I will continue to serve BCC with my whole heart.

We have shared 13 wonderful years full of spirituality, study, music, good deeds and celebration. In that time, I have learned how to be a better cantor and a better person from all of you. I hope I have helped you on your own paths towards holiness, a greater love of Judaism, and connection to our congregation, to yourself, to the Jewish people, the LGBTQ community and a God of your understanding.

As the cantor of BCC, I have been privileged to help mark and create moments of blessing for this sacred community. Moments that come to mind are beautiful and uplifting High Holy Day services, the dedication of BCC's new building, the celebration of Marriage Equality, fun and joyful Purim Shpiels, trips to Israel, adult BMitzvah services, Cantor's Concerts, Healing Havdalah services, Vision Award brunches, overcoming a global pandemic communally, countless classes and most recently the installation of Rabbi Jillian.

From the joy of baby namings and weddings to reflection and memory at funerals and other transitions; from outstanding BMitzvah students to marking powerful moments in your personal lives; from building relationships with you over shared meals or walks or choir rehearsals, together we have been on a journey of meaning and transformation. Thank you for being the blessing that makes BCC a house of new life.

Our lay leadership is a collection of amazing volunteers. Their dedication and efforts help keep BCC strong and healthy. I am eternally grateful for the support, kindness, and insights they have shared with me over the years. They will continue to enable BCC to grow in wisdom, justice and as a sacred community. I have been blessed with the most incredible and wise clergy partners, as well as a supportive and competent staff that guide BCC with strength, passion, understanding and an open heart.

At the end of every tractate of Talmud, or the completion of study of a sacred text, many learners say "Hadran alach, ve'hadrach alan," Aramaic for "We have returned to you and we will return to you, dear tractate, and you have returned to us and will return to us." You are all carriers of sacred text to me, to which I hope to return often.

It is my prayer that the experiences we've shared and the lessons we've learned together will remain with both of us throughout the days of our lives. Similarly to the Hadran Alach, we have the opportunity to return to those experiences and lessons at any point we wish to. I hope we will return to one another throughout the years and decades to come and I invite you to [remain in touch](#).

The coming months will bring celebrations and ample time to say our goodbyes. I want to thank you for this special opportunity to be your cantor, which I will forever cherish. I am grateful for your kindness, for sharing your hearts with me and for the honor of letting me be a part of your lives.

With love, blessings and gratitude,

Cantor Juval Porat

# JOSEPH AND HIS DREAMS

BY RABBI JILLIAN CAMERON

*Drash delivered on December 16, 2022 (23 Kislev  
5783) for Parashat Vayeshev*

And Joseph said to them: Shim-u nah, Hear please, this dream that I have dreamed.

Joseph isn't the first dreamer in the family; his father Jacob dreams of an ethereal ladder strewn with angels, ascending and descending, a ladder leading up to the heavens. After Jacob flees from his home and his family, in fear for his life, after deceiving his brother Esau, Jacob has this dream. This ladder to somewhere unknown accompanied by the voice of God, assuring a frightened Jacob of a promised future, first promised to his father and his grandfather before him.

*A dream is a wish your heart makes. (1)*

In the midst of the most uncertainty of Jacob's life, sleeping in the desert, having fled in fear from his home, resting his head on a rock for a pillow, Jacob is offered a glimpse of a future, a reassurance of what is to come.

*You've got to have a dream, if you don't have a dream, how you gonna make a dream come true? (2)*

But Joseph's dreams are different than his father's for Joseph, we learn in this week's Torah portion, has a particular gift, he is a dream interpreter.

The most famous of dream interpreters or infamous depending on whom you ask.  
Son of Jacob and his beloved Rachel,  
A favorite son,  
Imbued by God with fantastical abilities.

There are more chapters in the book of Genesis devoted to Joseph than anyone else.  
We have met him before this week, heard of his birth and of his name, but Vayeshev, this week's Torah portion, is where the baton is handed off, where Joseph becomes our main character, where the Genesis devotion begins.

We meet a 17-year-old Joseph,  
a 17 year old with a lot of older brothers,  
a lot of mother figures,

5

1 Mack David, Al Hoffman and Jerry Livingston for the Walt Disney film Cinderella (1950).  
2 Rogers and Hammerstein, South Pacific (1949).

a unique specimen in a large brood.

A young and arrogant Joseph, so enamored with himself and his gifts that he cannot see how his dreams have consequences.



So when he says, Shim-u nah, Hear please, this dream that I have dreamed.

And then regales his already jealous older brothers of not only one but two dreams that despite their varied subject matter, leave little to the imagination.

“Behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and my sheaf arose, and also stood upright; and, behold, your sheaves came round about, and bowed down to my sheaf.”

Followed by:

“Behold, I have dreamed yet another dream: and, behold, the sun and the moon and eleven stars bowed down to me.”

It is no wonder that our text then very clearly states: “Joseph dreamed a dream, and he told it to his brothers; and they hated him even more.”

And so it's not that difficult to understand how Joseph ends up being thrown in a pit by these brothers and then sold to some traveling Ishmaelites, sold again finally ending up in Egypt in the House of Potifar, a high ranking Egyptian official.

*I dreamed a dream of time gone by when hope was high and life worth living... (3)*

3 Claude-Michel Schönberg, Les Misérables (1987).

But after some time, a few more misunderstandings and some light jail time, it is Joseph's quick wit, clever mouth, and Godly wisdom that finally leads him to triumph rather than consequence when, at long last, Joseph does some growing up, and someone else understands the brilliance and possibility of his gift of dream interpretation.

A once immature and foolish Joseph begins to use his powers for good, offering credit to God for his abilities, and sharing his incredible gifts with those around him.

*Reality is wrong. Dreams are for real. (4)*

Rabbi Esther Israel teaches, "Dreams are not merely informative, but also provide opportunities for improving the future. This extra understanding of the possibilities afforded by correct interpretation of dreams is Joseph's advantage."

Joseph harnesses the power of the dreams with which he is presented, turning them from fleeting memories into realistic possibilities. His gift is not merely in the interpretation. He is able to solve real problems because he uses all the tools at his disposal. He is creative and resourceful, and he understands people. He sees opportunity where others don't, he doesn't just have a God given gift; he has honed it and knows how to use it.

This is a new breed of foreparent, an evolution of character in purpose and possibility.

And his way with dreams, his surety in his interpretation makes some uneasy, for even now, thousands of years later, dreams are still open for interpretation, still contain elements of the unknown, still are murky in origin and purpose.

I dream a lot. And although I'm no Joseph, I can usually dissect what I remember and trace it back to a particular experience or meme, or TV show or conversation. But for all of the tracing I accomplish, there are almost always elements of the unknown, things that just don't make sense or don't seem connected to anything. There is still so much we don't know, about ourselves, about the human brain, about the universe, about God.

*You may say that I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one. (5)*

The rabbis, our great sages, grappled with dreams too:

<sup>4</sup> Tupac

<sup>5</sup> John Lennon, Imagine (1971).

Rav Hisda said: A dream, not interpreted, is like a letter not read. As long as it is not interpreted it cannot be fulfilled; the interpretation of a dream creates its meaning.

Interesting. This seems like a head in the sand kind of mentality – if we just don't think about it, it doesn't exist. I wonder if Rav Hisda also thought if he closed his eyes he would be invisible. I kid, I kid.

Joseph never seemed scared of the dreams, even when he had to predict a terrible future, like the death of one of his fellow prisoners. Unlike Rav Hisda, Joseph didn't believe he was creating meaning through his interpretation, rather, it was just a translation, like a language that only Joseph understood.

But there is a certain bravery in his openness to translating, come what may.

And we can also understand Rav Hisda's reticence and fear in assigning deep meaning and possibility to something so nebulous, so fleeting and deeply subjective. Something unknowable, unprovable – something like God.

Ever the realist, Rabbi Yohanan in the name of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai weighs in to split the difference saying: Even a dream that will be fulfilled in the future contains some element of nonsense.

*All human beings are also dream beings. Dreaming ties us all together. (6)*

We are dreamers, meaning makers, translators, fearful and brave, prescient, and nonsensical, attempting to interpret our lives,

What we want  
What we need  
What it all means  
What the future may bring

So let's be brave dreamers and translators like Joseph  
Let us be interpreters too, cautious and fearless.  
Let us appreciate the whimsy, the wonderful Divine intricacies of the unknown and feel grounded and connected in the deep humanness of our quest for meaning.

We are all made of dreams, and our life stretches from sleep before birth to sleep after death. (7)

Shabbat Shalom.

<sup>6</sup> Jack Kerouac

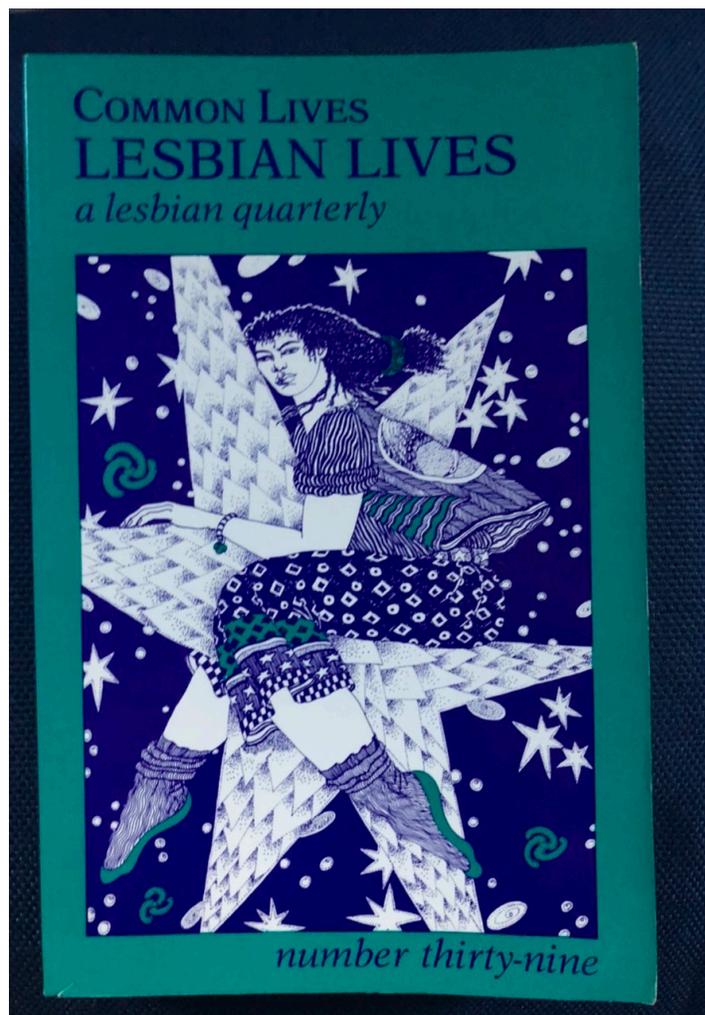
<sup>7</sup> The Tempest: Act 4 Scene 1 William Shakespeare

# A STORY OF LESBIAN LIVES

BY TRACY MOORE

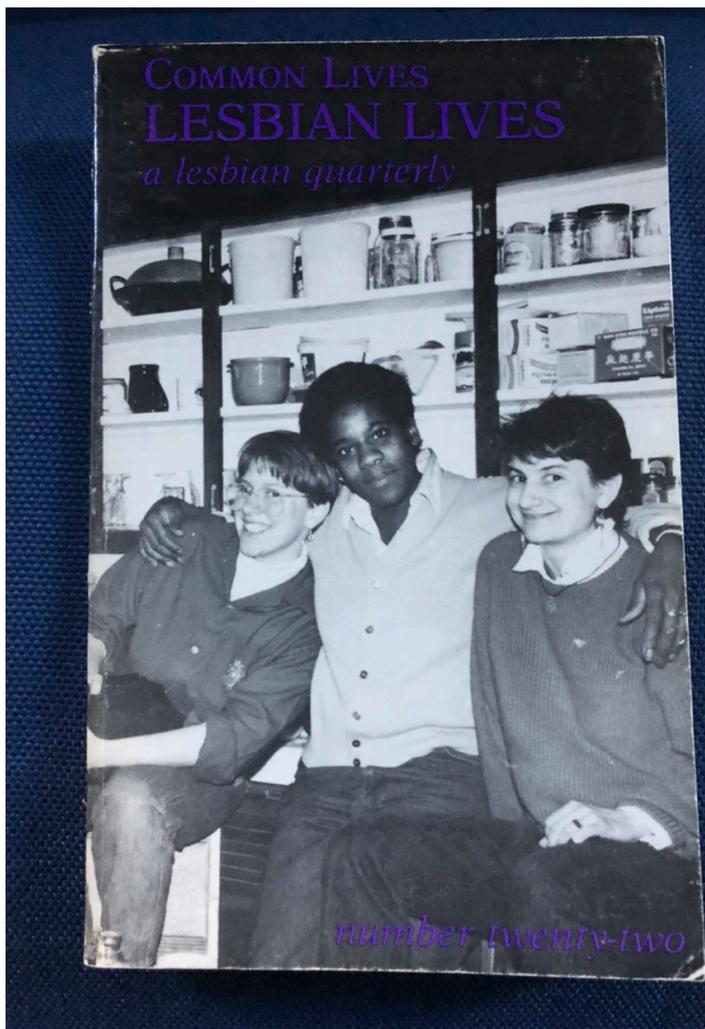
COMMON LIVES/LESBIAN LIVES WAS FOUNDED IN 1981 AS A QUARTERLY JOURNAL BY A LESBIAN COLLECTIVE IN IOWA CITY. I WAS ONE OF THE FOUNDERS. THE GOALS OF CL/LL WERE TO DOCUMENT THE THOUGHTS AND EXPERIENCES OF LESBIANS...AS WE "CLAIM OUR PAST, NAME OUR PRESENT CONDITIONS, AND ENVISION OUR EVOLVING FUTURES." \* THE COLLECTIVE WAS COMMITTED TO REFLECTING DIVERSITY BY "SOLICITING AND PRINTING...THE WORK AND IDEAS OF LESBIANS OF COLOR, FAT LESBIANS, LESBIANS OVER 50 AND UNDER 21 YEARS OLD, PHYSICALLY CHALLENGED LESBIANS, POOR AND WORKING-CLASS LESBIANS, AND LESBIANS OF VARYING CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS."

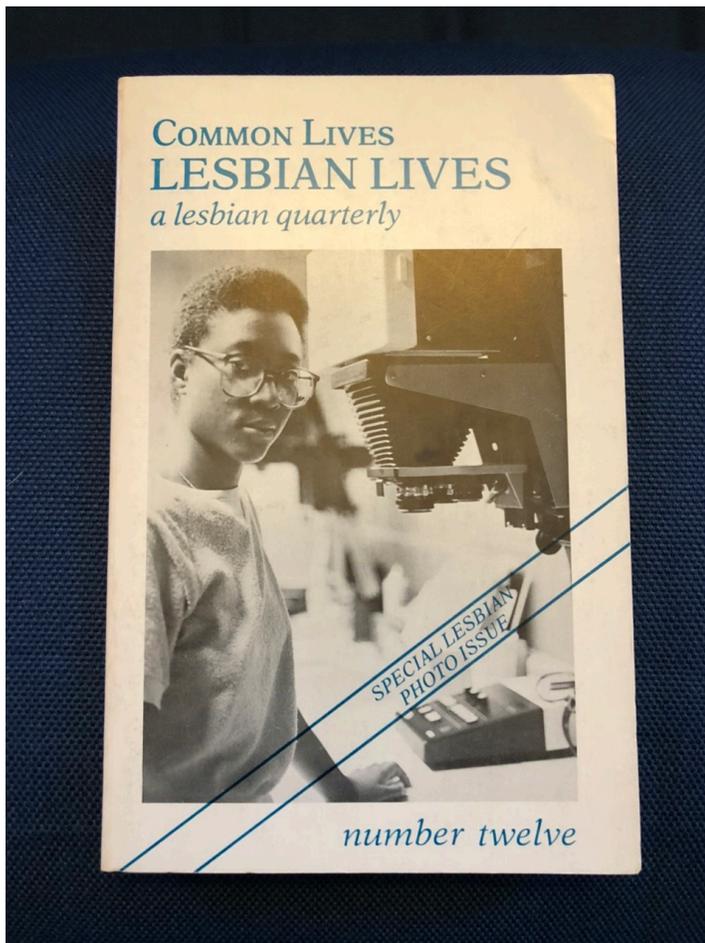
CL/LL WAS INSPIRED BY THE JOURNAL *Sinister Wisdom*, FOUNDED IN 1976 BY HARRIET DESMOINES AND CATHERINE NICHOLSON, WHOSE COMMITMENT WAS TO RESIST PATRIARCHY, RACISM, AND OTHER



ills by giving voice to lesbian feminists. Still going strong today, *Sinister Wisdom* remains the longest published lesbian journal. Except for *SW*, lesbian writing and art had gone unpublished except occasionally in magazines. Harriet and Catherine "convinced us that [publishing] should be done and that ordinary women like ourselves could make it happen." "Further motivation was our own constant thirst for more lesbian identity, a passion for the integrity and richness of lesbian culture, and dedication to our community in all its developing forms."

Here is my lesbian life story. I was born during World War II in 1943 in Charlotte, North Carolina. My dad enlisted in the Navy, went to sea in the Pacific, and soon after VJ day arrived in Japan, returning in 1946 to my mom plus two





daughters and becoming a salesman in Connecticut. We moved to Ohio where I went to school through college, then followed my lover Ed to the University of Iowa where we went to grad school and married. I taught secondary school in Iowa City, eventually earning an MA in English.

And that's where things changed. I fell seriously in love with a woman, taking off with her for a year in Austria. Lots more happened, but relationships and courses swerved. In the late 1970s I moved to Long Beach, CA, fell in love with Anne Lee, and headed back to Iowa City with her and our friend Cindy Cleary. We had already organized the magazine collectively with many others in California while still others did so in Iowa City, so the future was waiting, and began.

The first issue of CL/LL was published in Fall 1981 when I was 38. But since the late 1960s, in Iowa City "the large, diverse yet cohesive lesbian community [had] a long history and [was] particularly active."

Publishing CL/LL as a collective included editing, designing issues, communicating to

folks who submitted their work, and getting each quarterly printed and mailed to readers in envelopes--on schedule. During this time, I was also active in women's and lesbians' rights in politics, childcare, local and state issues.

There's a lot more to know about CL/LL history, such as our collective working with the support of a "network of lesbians throughout the country." The issues were typeset, printed and bound by lesbians in Iowa City who were in those trades, making it an all-lesbian publication. Lesbian writers (mostly from across the US) who published in CL/LL before becoming famous include Joan Nestle (issue #1), Alison Bechdel (who at 21 published writing, not cartoons, in #2), Paula Gunn Allen (#3), and Kitty Tsui (#4).

In addition to founding the quarterly, my own experience was influenced by my lover, Anne Lee, who helped establish CL/LL and died of cancer at age 36, just before publication of the first issue. She was a writer and a self-acknowledged witch who was published in several issues and followed by many lesbians. Although grief-stricken, I also was buoyed by publishing pieces by Anne and essays about her life, as well as support from the Iowa City lesbian community that kept me going.

Just a few years later, I met Lisa Edwards when we were hired at ACT. One day at the Pride rally she hid behind the big rock on the quad, and soon began to know the lesbian community. Yes, we fell in love and have been together 37+ years.

And now, we two original collective members plus three more have been working for two years already, nearly finishing a special Common Lives/Lesbian Lives issue of Sinister Wisdom, to be published early in 2024. When it arrives, I'll have some of these unique issues to show you.

Thanks for following my story!

\*All quotes are from Common Lives/Lesbian Lives.

# THE “A” STANDS FOR ASEXUAL

BY ADAM BARRON

The following three paragraphs are taken from *The Invisible Orientation, An Introduction to Asexuality* by Julie Sondra Decker, c. 2014, pages 181-182, and will serve as the launching point for this article.

Asexuality is: An orientation describing people who don't feel sexually attracted to anyone. (It's not a behavior, like abstinence. It's an orientation, like gay, straight, or bi.)

Asexuality is not: It's not a sickness or a mental illness. It's not the same thing as celibacy. It's not proof that someone has been abused. It is not “caused” by a medical issue or negative experience. It's not a hurdle people should be expected to “get over.” It's not the same thing as having a low sex drive. It doesn't refer to a person who is a virgin or vows never to have sex. It doesn't refer to a person who has had bad sex and sworn off it. It isn't about hating people who have sex, hating other people in general, or failing to meet the right person. It isn't hidden homosexuality. It isn't a religious statement. It isn't just a phase. It isn't a diagnosis or a cry for attention or a reason to seek therapy. It doesn't mean a person is ugly or socially awkward or lonely.

It might surprise you: That asexual people can have romantic relationships and marriages if they want to. That asexuals may negotiate sexual relationships if they want to. That some asexual people want to be parents. That some asexual people feel other (nonsexual) types of attraction. That some asexual people masturbate. That scientific studies have been done to examine asexuality as a sexual orientation. That asexual people can be any gender, sex, race, religion, or national origin. That asexual people can experience prejudice and discrimination for their orientation. That people can have disabilities / have mental or physical illnesses / take medication / be abuse survivors / be autistic and be asexual without these intersections “causing” each other or delegitimizing any of their realities. That most asexual people don't want to be “cured.”

ASEXUALITY MAY BE THE MOST RECENT APPEARANCE ON THE “QUEER” SPECTRUM, the least discussed, the least understood, and the least studied. Even many asexuals aren't aware their condition is fairly common or that it has a name ... or an organization. To make things worse, the term is not a “sexy” one, but rather brings to mind images of amoebae and plants. The above quote offers a bare bones introduction to asexuality, so we may enter the discussion from a common point.

## My Story

My most salient memory of early puberty was in my middle school health class. One day we kids, with parental permission, got to watch a movie about our emerging sexuality. I remember a very authoritative sounding narrator stating that during puberty, boys become attracted to girls, and girls become attracted to boys. The pictures of attractive boys and girls shown on the screen helped to etch this memory into my brain.

I was 12 or 13, and on each new birthday, I remained faithful to its message, awaiting my sexual attraction. Yet I experienced none, not for girls and not for boys. It was like waiting for Godot. By my 17th birthday I began doubting if my sexual attraction would come. My classmates were busy bragging about who they went to bed with and who they wanted to go to bed with. Peer group pressure being what it was, I did what I had to do ... try to have sex with my girlfriend of the time. But with no attraction there was no sex. I had to reassure her, it's not you, it's me. I began feeling defective, and later like a freak.

Sensing my depression, my mother got me a consultation with a prominent psychotherapist. My doctor felt I needed non-threatening experiences (also called sensate focus) to discover my sexuality, and he referred me for sessions with several sexual surrogate therapists. After several years of intermittent surrogate therapy, I learned how to approximate a sexual response when I needed to, but there was still no attraction or drive to find a sexual partner.

Around 2000, I discovered the newly created website [Asexuality.org](http://Asexuality.org), belonging to AVEN



(Asexuality Visibility and Education Network). With great relief, I learned I was among tens of thousands identifying as “Asexual.”

A few years later, “Q” was added to the LGBT acronym, followed by “IA” for intersex and asexual. Being officially on the spectrum of marginalized sexual identities empowered me to share my asexual identity in a drash at my queer-affirming synagogue, Beth Chayim Chadashim. The warm reception I received caused much improvement in my social confidence and self-esteem and helped me to form new friendships.

### Terminology

The most agreed upon definition by researchers is that asexuals are people who are not sexually attracted to any other person. After this there is a lot more vocabulary. A person who in special circumstances may feel sexual attraction is “gray asexual” or “demisexual.”

Some asexuals can form romantic (emotionally intimate) relationships – they are referred to as “heteroromantic”, “homoromantic”, “biromantic”, etc. – other asexuals who do not form romantic relationships are called “aromantic”. Many asexuals do enjoy physical contact or cuddling.

Several large studies since the 1990’s suggest asexuality’s frequency is about 0.5% in the countries studied.

### Common Experiences of Asexuals

Many young people, when they first confide

Above: Barcex, CC BY-SA 3.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons

about their lack of sexual attraction, are told they are just going through a phase, or that they have not met the right person yet. or that their problem was due to abuse, or their problem is hormonal. That they are abused, damaged, or have a medical/psychiatric problem. (Note: having a physical exam and hormone levels checked may be a good idea, particularly for individuals who previously did not feel asexual.)

Asexuals may be told they have it easy because they don’t have to deal with all the sexual problems others have. Many asexuals acknowledge that sex is one of the “good things” in people’s lives, just not in their lives.

Asexuals go through many years thinking that they are defective and alone in the world. While LGB people meet one another due to sexual attraction, this by definition does not occur for asexuals. They did not have asexual night at the local gay bar.

### New hope for asexuals

In 1994, psychologist Anthony Bogaert conducted a study published in *The Journal of Sex Research* that concluded that 1 in 100 persons identified as asexual. According to this paper, 1% of a 1994 British probability sample indicated feeling no attraction for males or females. Awareness that asexuality can be this common sparked additional research.



Above: <https://www.facebook.com/IrishAcces/>

The internet has been of the greatest benefit to asexuals. Around the year 2000, David Jay founded AVEN, accompanied by the website Asexuality.org. This provided for the first time opportunities for asexuals to share their stories on a large scale. A great many asexuals are profoundly relieved to know their condition has a name, and they are not alone in the world.

In the early 2000s the first full-length books appeared about asexuality. Asexuals began using “Ace” to refer to one another, infusing some much needed pride.

In 2009, AVEN members participated in the first asexual entry into an American pride parade when they walked in the San Francisco Pride Parade.

In 2016 Joe Parrish became the United States’ first openly asexual state election candidate.

In 2019, Washington became the first U.S. state to recognize Asexual Awareness Week, which it did through a ceremonial proclamation signed by governor Jay Inslee.

## How Can We Support Asexuals?

Why is it so important that we study and understand asexuality? Besides helping us to understand the gamut of human sexuality, we want to be there for others. There are few experiences as emotionally charged as sexuality. We are led to believe from an early age that it is normal to develop sexual attractions at reaching puberty.

Without this reassurance that we are part of just another sexual variant, asexuals will often feel defective, the experience of shame, which can be

toxic, and lead to depression.

Here are a few things we all can do to support asexuals in our community.

1. Approach people in general without the assumption that everyone experiences sexual attraction for one or both sexes. This only makes asexuals feel as though they are defective in some way.
2. If someone you know is, or may be, asexual and you want to talk about it, educate yourself first about asexuality (reviewing the paragraphs at the top of this article is a good start). A Google search will lead to many helpful articles.
3. When you do have a conversation, do more listening than talking or asking. Let the person describe their experience of asexuality for themselves.
4. Acknowledge that asexuality exists as a distinct orientation. Avoid making comparisons with other orientations like homosexuality or bisexuality, especially comparisons of which group experiences the most prejudice or misunderstanding.
5. If the person is unsure if they are asexual or struggling to acknowledge it, give them space to do so. If you bring up the subject, do so without putting pressure on them to admit or deny that they are asexual.
6. If the person opens up to you, thank them for trusting you and ask what they need in the way of support. Don’t compare their experiences to your own (different) ones.
7. Don’t make assumptions about the person’s ability to have relationships with others, romantic or otherwise. Let them bring up the subject, if they want to.

I hope you’ll find this article helpful and educational, and I look forward to further discussion at BCC on this important topic.

Further reading:

1. *The Invisible Orientation, An Introduction to Asexuality* by Julie Sondra Decker, c. 2014
2. Website [www.Asexuality.org](http://www.Asexuality.org)
3. *Healing the Shame that Binds you*, by John Bradshaw, a New York Times Best Seller.

# SPIRITUALITY IN THE WAKE OF COVID

BY GORDON BLITZ



I'VE BEEN THINKING ABOUT SPIRITUALITY AND HOW IT HAS CHANGED SINCE COVID.

Spirituality is one of the most overused and misunderstood words in the English language. Let's get this out of the way – religion and spirituality can exist exclusive of one another. We all know people who are spiritual but profess not

to be religious, and you can be religious yet not have much spirituality. BCC is one of the best environments to combine spirituality and religion.

One way of looking at spirituality comes directly from the term “spirit”. What is a spirit? From Latin, it means breath or breath of god. The dictionary refers to a spirit as constituting one's unseen intangible being. It's your essence—what makes you tick. Your spirit exists beyond your physical body – your soul or psyche. When someone dies, it's their spirit that lives on afterward. The things we remember about that person. Spirit is such a powerful word – it encompasses our drive or ambition, the fashion by which we energize our life, the future. Is it any wonder that alcohol is referred to as “spirits?” A poor rationalization about how the use of alcohol could be used to raise your spirit. When a person is drunk it can be thought that they are being inhabited by spirits.

You can be spiritual with nature, and more profoundly it's your spiritual relationship with your parents, friends, lovers and God that can give your existence meaning. How you commingle these relationships with your spirit is what makes your life fulfilling. Spirituality doesn't have to be a religious experience. It can be a quiet moment of reflection – an unexpected emotion. Allowing yourself to doubt can be spiritual. Memories of important people and events in your life can be spiritual. When I think about my grandma cooking apple strudel, my dad at my Bar Mitzvah three months before

he died, and my wedding to Neal in 2008.

How do you get in touch with your spiritual self? Being with other spiritual people – this was the perk of coming to temple on Friday night – is almost impossible on Zoom. The world would stop for a few hours. But on Zoom, the technology no longer helps our bodies and minds transfer to another arena.

Being in the sanctuary can make you be enveloped in spirituality. Think about seeing the bimah – the various rabbis and service leaders who have presided over the congregation. You could feel their warmth just like the heat emanating from flickering Shabbat candles.

Remember the flowers – how they enhanced the beauty of the bimah – the carved wood on the podium. You could see how the ark houses the Torah. Remember how many times the ark had been opened – the hands that have lifted the Torah out of the ark. In person, you were aware of the memorial board that recognizes those congregants, friends, and relatives we've lost. The great honor that it means to have their name ensconced on this board, lit up when it's the anniversary of their death. Even the piano is spiritual – it reminds us of the sweet music that is such an integral part of the service.

When we looked at the back of each chair in the synagogue we saw a plaque honoring someone. You could feel your siddur – how it's changed over the years, the wonderful way it's been degenderized, the important ways in which it speaks to us as gay, lesbian, and bisexual. Each breath you would take in our house of new life in person brought us the gift of spirituality. Fragments have been lost by the technology of Zoom. Yes, it provides a way for the physically challenged to experience services. Zoom can eliminate the stress and cost of driving. It can provide comfort when we are too ill to attend. A safe haven from Covid. But it isn't a replacement. So, if we want to be present and in the moment and if we want to regain the spirituality that we may have lost during the pandemic, being in person at synagogue is a start.



# ART AS MIRROR

BY MAGGIE BOYLES

I GREW UP IN AN ARTISTIC HOUSEHOLD. When I was a small child, I used to sit on my mother's lap and together we'd flip through

of self-awareness. I don't know what I look like when I'm not looking directly at myself—an issue many schizophrenics deal with—and I don't know who I am. The self-portrait in acrylic featured here is painted in the colors of the pills I need to take to organize my fractured mind. The ink profile self-portrait is my attempt at mapping the unmappable.

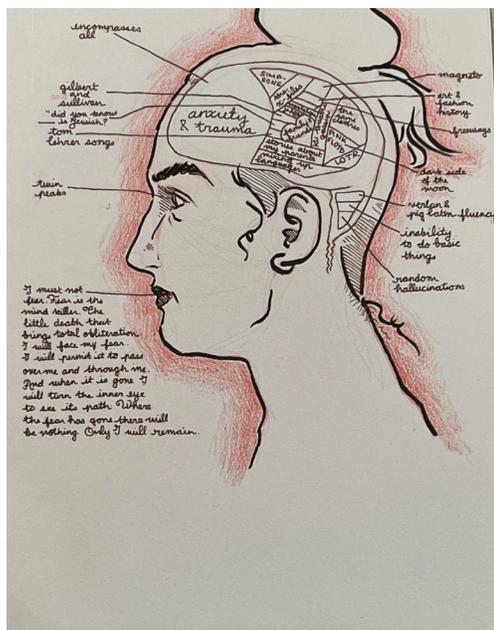
The other piece I have included is a piece I created as part of a culminating project in an antiracist education class, “Der Manifesto” – the Manifesto. The text in Yiddish reads: “I must not be exhausted. I must do my best” and the text in German reads: “I will do my best, gentlemen,” a quote from the 1960s German television show, Percy Stuart. This piece is inspired by Ketubot, my love of coffee, a bloté Gemora, and the Romani Holocaust remembrance phrase: “Dikh he na bister” – Look and do not forget.

I have never done art professionally, despite my mother's best efforts and encouragement, and primarily use my work as a means of self-exploration and storytelling. I appreciate this opportunity to get to share something so personal with a community that means so much to me.

Sister Wendy's art history books, the great works of Diego Velázquez, and *What We Wore*. I trained under my mother and my aunt as well as Kevin Kutz (a local artist in my place of birth, Bedford, Pennsylvania). My primary influences are my mentors, Hergé (the creator of the *Tintin* comics) and many comic book creators, fashion illustrator Jordi Labanda, Eastern Orthodox Christian iconography, Felix Nussbaum, and many, many others.

I am a third-culture kid (a TCK, for short). That is to say, someone who grew up in a land and culture different than the culture of their parents. My parents are both from the United States and I was raised primarily in France and Italy, spending some small amounts of time in Albania and England as well. Like many TCKs and children of immigrants,

I have struggled with forming a cohesive identity. Compounding this, of course, is ample trauma and my own mental health issues as a schizoaffective (schizophrenic + bipolar) person. For these reasons, my favorite portrait subject is myself. This is not due to vanity, but rather due to a complete lack



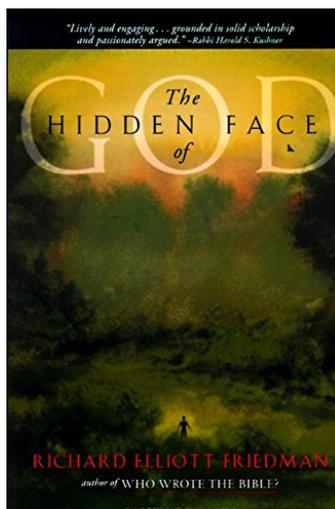
## BOOKS AND BAGELS BOOK REVIEW

# *The Hidden Face of God* by Richard Elliott Friedman

Reviewed by Larry Nathenson

THERE ARE MANY WAYS TO READ AND UNDERSTAND THE HEBREW BIBLE. Traditional Jews consider it Divine revelation, containing God's commandments to God's Chosen People as well as stories about our ancestors. Modern scholars, beginning in the 19th century, understood the Bible in historical context as composed of originally distinct texts that were later woven together into a single narrative after the return from the Babylonian Exile in the 5th century BCE (the "documentary hypothesis"). The Bible can also be read as a work of literature, as the story of the ancient Israelites' encounters with their God. Richard Elliott Friedman, perhaps the most versatile contemporary Bible scholar, has explored all of these perspectives. His best-known work, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (1987), updates the documentary hypothesis in light of new archeological discoveries. His *Commentary on the Torah* (2001) treats the Torah in a more traditional way as a coherent text with a new English translation and fresh commentary.

In his 1995 book *The Disappearance of God*, published in paperback as *The Hidden Face of God*, Friedman takes up the literary perspective and explores the mystery of why God disappears over the course of the Biblical narrative. In the first chapters of Genesis, God appears and acts directly in the world, walking in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve (who hide from God because they have disobeyed God's command not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil). God later performs miracles and speaks to the patriarchs and matriarchs, the prophets, and some of the kings. But by the end of the Hebrew Bible God is entirely absent, and humans are on their own, responsible for their own actions. In the Book of Esther, God isn't mentioned at all. The "wisdom literature" of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes feels very much like modern secular philosophy or psychology. When Ezra reads the Torah publicly after the return from Babylon, Friedman says, "the word of God takes the place of the acts of God." The Bible moves from a world of talking snakes and splitting seas to one in which human relationships with God are a



matter of personal belief and spiritual practice.

Friedman offers several explanations for this little-noticed phenomenon. Some focus on Israelite psychology in the face of conquest and exile, the perception that God has abandoned Israel in its hour of greatest danger. Another explanation cites the tension inherent in humans' status as creatures made in God's image who are nevertheless subordinate and subject to God's commands. We aspire to imitate God by exercising the dominion over the natural world that God has granted us. Yet, God also expects obedience to God's commands and punishes us when we disobey.

While the authors of the Bible were comfortable with the idea of God's direct involvement in human affairs in the distant past, the later books reflect the experience of God's distance in their own lives. Friedman also suggests that "by moving the essence of divinity from the realm of nature to the realm of history, Israelite religion made it possible for a deity to recede." In other words, the Israelites no longer accepted the common religious view of the world as pervaded by spirits that inhabit the natural world. They replaced that view with a transcendent deity who is not part of the world but acts on it from outside. Israel's God was manifest in the world through the history of human events, not the cycles of nature.

In the second half of the book, Friedman relates the Biblical disappearance of God to the "death of God" theology of modern times. He also discusses recent attempts to draw an analogy between the Big Bang theory of cosmology and the Jewish mystical tradition of Kabbalah in which God withdraws from the world (*tzimtzum*) to make room for natural phenomena and human beings. Here he is on shakier ground in my view as the parallels he draws with the Biblical disappearance of God are unclear in many respects. But overall, the book evokes intriguing literary and philosophical mysteries and raises new possibilities for divine-human reunion in a more secular and scientific age.

*BCC's Books and Bagels discussion group has met continuously since January 1995. The group met monthly in members' homes for a bagel brunch and discussion, although now we are meeting by Zoom until further notice. We read a variety of books: fiction and non-fiction, American and Israeli, historical and contemporary. The only requirement is some Jewish content (LGBT content is a plus, but not required). The group is open to BCC members and non-members, and you are welcome to join us for a particular book that may interest you. RSVP is required. For upcoming books, see the BCC Weekly News and Updates or check the [website calendar](#). To register for the Zoom link, contact Larry Nathenson at [larrynath@aol.com](mailto:larrynath@aol.com).*



# A DAY IN THE LIFE OF ...

*In this column, BCC members share things they do or love on a typical day. In this issue, Rabbi Jillian Cameron tells us about one of her days.*

*One of the many blessings of being a rabbi is that every day is different and yet my life is punctuated by the rhythm of Jewish time and BCC time, the weekly cycle of Torah Study and Shabbat and the yearly cycle of holidays and other annual celebrations.*

*For this fun exercise, I chose a mundane week day. I hope you enjoy!  
- Rabbi Jillian Cameron*



**WAKE UP  
AND BE  
AMAZING**

**7:30 - 8:00** - I am lucky that my natural body clock and the California sunshine help me awaken without the jarring beep beep beeping of an alarm. I am not a morning person as it were, so it takes me a few minutes to come to terms with the fact that I'm no longer sleeping and get out of bed.



**8:00** - I head downstairs to give my sweet pup Yasha his breakfast, which he gobbles up as if I've never fed him before. Yasha and I then head out for our morning walk, during which I almost always call my mom.



**10:00** - My first meeting of the day! I chat with a potential conversion student who is interested in attending Exploring Judaism, the class I teach for those who are often, though not always, on the journey toward conversion. I am ever grateful and honored when I speak with someone new who is not sure but hoping that I might listen, offer them respect and a warm welcome.



**12:00 pm** - Between meetings, I make sure to pass along necessary information to Maggie Boyles, our communications coordinator and administrative assistant, so she can build a marketing campaign or create graphics or a sign up sheet. I also check in with president Jessica Donath, sharing similar information and my progress on the copy of a letter we are going to send to the community in a few weeks. I then give Yasha his lunch.



**12:30 pm** - I hop in my car with Yasha to meet Cantor Juval for our weekly meeting at BCC. We talk through any number of things, sharing information, brainstorming together about an upcoming holiday and collaborating on Shabbat services for the week.



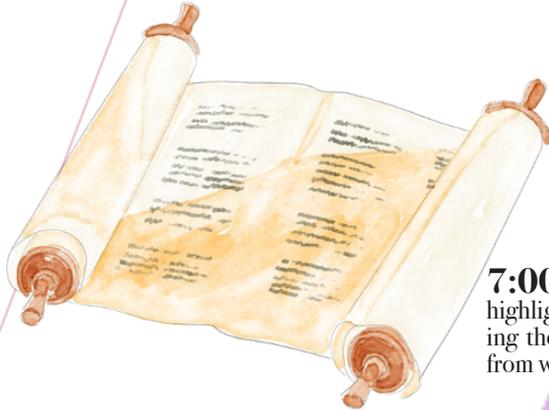
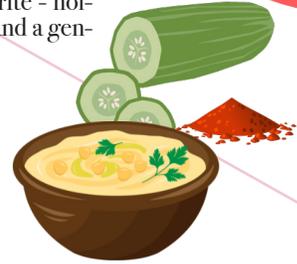
**2:00 pm** - Cantor Juval and I meet with the parent of an upcoming BMitzvah student, to talk through some logistics, check in about the student's progress and put some dates in the calendar for future meetings and a BMitzvah rehearsal. I'm so excited that we have a handful of BMitzvahs coming up in the next few years!



**3:45** - I return from my walk with a bit more energy and tackle my growing inbox for the next hour or so. I also make a few phone calls, checking in on a BCC member who has had a recent medical issue, another few members who I haven't spoken with recently, with whom I would like to catch up.



**4:45** - I fix myself a quick snack, my new favorite - hollowed out raw cucumber slathered with hummus and a generous sprinkle of tajin.



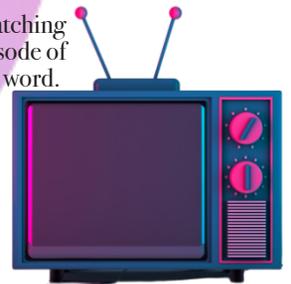
**7:00** - Torah Study! Teaching Torah Study is one of the highlights of my week, each and every week. I love examining the text with this thoughtful, smart and diverse group from whom I always learn. And we have so much fun!



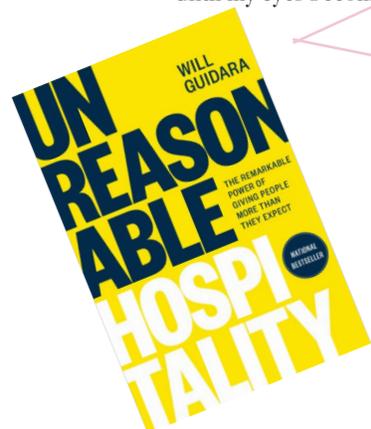
**8:45** - I'm hungry! It's possible that I have something in my kitchen that I can put together quickly for dinner but it is also possible that I will order something that will be delivered for dinner. I have a particular hankering for a chopped salad tonight.



**9:30** - It's finally dinner time! I usually eat dinner while watching television. After a long and busy day, it's nice to watch an episode of Friends that I have seen so many times I could recite word for word.



**10:30** - I've been reading and enjoying a new book recently called, *Unreasonable Hospitality* by Will Guidara. So I find my bookmark and dig back in until my eyes become less and less willing to stay open.



**11:30** - I get ready for bed and with great joy sink under the covers. Yasha hops up, pawing to get under the duvet and settles in next to me. I noodle around instagram and facebook for a bit, catching up with friends and their adventures. If I'm lucky, I drift off to sleep around midnight or so.

# BCC QUESTIONNAIRE:

## BCC VICE PRESIDENT NICOLASA NEVAREZ

*Asking a set of questions to learn new things about old friends was a popular pastime in 19th century Europe. At 14, future French novelist Marcel Proust became one of the first to fill out a questionnaire in his friend Antoinette Faure's book Confessions; An Album to Record Thoughts, Feelings, & co. In modern times, Inside the Actor's Studio host James Lipton created a set of questions as a fun and not-too-serious way of getting to know his guests better. Vanity Fair published a Proust-inspired questionnaire on the last page of the magazine for more than 20 years that became one of its most successful and popular columns. Since its heyday, [Karl Marx](#), [Terry Gross](#), [Arnold Schwarzenegger](#), and [David Bowie](#) have all participated in a version of the classic question-and-answer parlor game. At G'vanim Magazine, we are pleased to introduce the BCC Questionnaire!*

### 1. What is your idea of Perfect Happiness?

A day spent with Diane, my wife, traveling somewhere together.

### 2. What is your greatest fear?

Not having Diane in my life.

### 3. What do you regard as the lowest depth of misery?

Losing someone you love unexpectedly.

### 4. Where would you most like to live?

With the people I love and care about.

### 5. What is the trait you most deplore in yourself?

Self doubting myself.

### 6. What is the trait you most deplore in others?

Lack of self reflection.

### 7. What is the quality you most like in a person?

Kindness.

### 8. What do you consider the most over-rated virtue?

Tidiness.

### 9. If you could change one thing about yourself, what would it be?

My impatience.

### 10. Which living person do you most admire?

Teachers of all ages.

### 11. On what occasion do you lie?

To spare someone's feelings.

### 12. Which words or phrases do you most overuse?

N/A.

### 13. Which talent would you most like to have?

Playing the piano.

### 14. What do you consider your greatest achievement?

Being able to be forgiving of myself.

### 15. What is your most treasured possession?

My friends.

### 16. What is your greatest extravagance?

My love of Disneyland.

**17. What is your favorite TV show?**

West Wing.

**18. What is your favorite sound?**

The sound of the wind blowing through our trees.

**19. Which book do you wish you had written?**

None.

**20. Who is your hero of fiction or Torah?**

N/A.

**21. Which historical figure would you most like to meet?**

N/A.

**22. Who are your heroes in real life?**

Teachers.

**23. What are your favorite names?**

None.

**24. What is your favorite age?**

Now, 68.

**25. What is your favorite childhood memory?**

Going to Dodger games with my dad.

**26. What turns you on (creatively, spiritually or emotionally)?**

Connecting with other like minded people.

**27. What turns you off?**

Negativity.

**28. What is your favorite curse word?**

Damn.

**29. What is your favorite language?**

Spanish.

**30. What profession other than your own would you like to attempt?**

Math coordinator.

**31. Who would you like to see on a new banknote?**

Shirley Chisholm.

**32. Which invention do you admire most?**

The public library.

**33. What is the first thing you do in the morning?**

Read the paper.

**34. What is the last thing you do before going to bed?**

Say I love you to my wife.

**35. How would you like to die?**

Peacefully in my sleep.

**36. If you were to die and come back as a person, an animal or a thing, who or what would it be?**

A cat.