

**3 Excerpts from**  
***A Year with Mordecai Kaplan: Wisdom on the Weekly Torah Portion***  
**By Rabbi Steven Carr Reuben**

Excerpt #1: Finding the Sacred in the Midst of Sorrow (Exodus, *Mishpatim* —Human Dignity)

Excerpt #2: The Food Insecurity High Holy Day Appeal (Leviticus, 'Emor – Hunger)

Excerpt #3: Lessons from Nelson Mandela (Numbers, *Be-ha'alotekha* – Humility)

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Book orders: <https://jps.org/books/a-year-with-mordecai-kaplan/>

**Finding the Sacred in the Midst of Sorrow**

**By Rabbi Steven Carr Reuben**

On the first night of Hanukkah many years ago, I was about to light the first lights of the Hanukkah menorah when the phone rang. Poised with the first candle in hand, and not wishing to interrupt the sacred moment, I let the answering machine pick up the call. With an eerily calm voice, a woman active in our congregation who was clearly doing her best to hold her emotions in check proceeded to tell me a horrific story. Her husband had gone to pick up his brother, who because of mental illness was living in a half-way house in a nearby town, to bring him to their home for that night to celebrate Hanukkah. Instead of getting into the car, the emotionally disturbed brother had reached through the window and stabbed her husband to death while their eight-year-old son sat next to him in the front seat. Since she had been waiting at home at the time, she was now on her way to the police station where authorities had taken her son. Could I possibly meet them there to provide some emotional and spiritual support?

I was stunned, shocked, and horrified beyond comprehension. I knew her son well from the years he had been in our preschool and now religious school program. My eyes filled with tears and my heart broke in pieces imagining the trauma this sweet little boy had just endured.

It was this family's loving way to bring his uncle who lived full-time in a psychiatric halfway house back to their home to celebrate Hanukkah each year. In his delusional state, for reasons that to this day we will never know, he suddenly decided that his brother was "the devil" and needed to be killed.

My wife and I met the mother and son at the police station, held their hands, and struggled to find words to help them make some semblance of sense out of something so absolutely senseless. I sat with them every day for weeks, feeling as impotent and overwhelmed as I have ever felt as a rabbi, and ultimately knowing that the best I or any of us could do was simply show up and hold them in our hearts.

The brother was immediately arrested and temporarily locked up in the psychiatric ward of the county jail. Soon a decision had to be made regarding punishment or revenge. In the midst of their excruciating loss and grief, his family nonetheless insisted on recognizing the inherent worth of the mentally ill brother. Rather than confined to prison, he was ultimately incarcerated in a mental institution.

In the Talmud, *Shabbat* 133b, Abba Shaul says, "And I will glorify God" means "Be like God." Rather than give in to their own rage in the face of the senseless murder of their beloved husband and father, this anguished family chose to draw upon their belief in a higher moral authority, imitating the compassion and mercy we associate with godliness.

Mordecai Kaplan also taught that just as God is said to be gracious and compassionate, so, too, we can choose to be gracious and compassionate even under the most trying of circumstances. For me, this family's act has been an enduring model of the best within us. Extending compassion even to one who is so disturbed that he takes another's life is another way of recognizing a "higher authority" and striving to embrace the sacred that lies within every human being.

## **The Food Insecurity High Holy Day Appeal**

**By Rabbi Steven Carr Reuben**

Every High Holiday season since the year 2000, our congregation, Kehillat Israel Reconstructionist Congregation in Pacific Palisades, California, has held a food drive to support a food bank that serves thousands of people in our community each year.

This was the brainchild of Rachel Jeffer, a past president of my synagogue. One day during Torah study, we had been discussing Rav Assi's declaration in *Baba Batra 9a* that *tzedakah* is equal to all the other *mitzvot* combined. We talked about the fundamental meaning of *tzedakah*—that it is more than simply giving money when asked; it is making sure that the most vulnerable have their basic needs met as a precondition of having true justice in our society. Rachel said, “How can anyone find and hold a job, create a healthy relationship, be a good parent, treat others with dignity and respect, if they face each day hungry? How can their kids go to school and be able to learn if their stomachs are growling? That can't be justice.” And so, she decided to use the most sacred time of the Jewish year not to raise money for the synagogue, as so many synagogues are forced to do with their annual “Yom Kippur Appeal,” but rather to make an appeal for those families who live with food insecurity every day.

We were thrilled the first year when our “Food Insecurity High Holy Day Appeal” led to our donating several thousand pounds of food to the Westside Food Bank. The problem seemed to keep getting worse, though, so each year we stepped up our commitment to making a difference in more hungry lives. Now after seventeen years of sharing stories of those struggling daily to put food on their tables and creating a

congregation-wide consciousness and passion for alleviating hunger in our community, this past High Holiday season we collected more than 165,000 pounds of food—in other words, 165,000 meals providing sustenance, comfort, and hope for thousands of men, women, and children. We have become the single largest provider to the local food bank of any synagogue, church, or institution in all of Los Angeles.

We Jews are no longer farmers tilling the soil, raising crops to feed our families and leaving the corners of our fields unharvested for orphans, widows, and strangers. Our way of fulfilling the religious obligation of “*peah*,” of leaving the corners of our fields for the poor, is to collect food and contribute it to homeless shelters, soup kitchens, and food banks. In Mordecai Kaplan’s eyes, these acts of *g’milut hasadim* (spiritual loving kindness) are our modern version of divine revelation and how we demonstrate the godliness that lies within us all.

## **Lessons from Nelson Mandela**

**By Rabbi Steven Carr Reuben**

I stood in silence before a tiny prison cell in the maximum-security prison on Robben Island, nestled quietly in the harbor of Cape Town, South Africa. All it contained were three rough wool blankets, one wooden stool, and a small, hard, metal bed in the corner. I shook my head in awe, knowing that for eighteen years this tiny, oppressive space on an isolated island had been the “home” of Nelson Mandela. Here he had suffered the indignities of physical torture and mental anguish. Here he had written secret notes, hid them in the nooks and crannies of his cell, and smuggled them to the outside world to call attention to his ongoing struggle against the vicious apartheid regime of his homeland.

I was startled from my deep concentration by the quiet voice of my “guide,” Charles Mboto. Charles is one of several black African men who serve as guides for visitors to the Robben Island prison. Like the others, Charles himself was once a political prisoner in this prison. He points to the yard where guards would regularly beat him for trying to speak with another prisoner; the lime pit where they were forced to work all day in the hot sun with no water; and the flat, desolate sand where they would be buried up to their heads for hours in the midday sun as “discipline,” merely to keep them broken and in line.

Charles had been arrested and sentenced to five years on Robben Island for joining an anti-apartheid group. When the five, tortuous years were up, the authorities simply announced he was still a danger to the state and added another seven years to his

sentence. So, there he stayed, with Nelson Mandela and so many others – imprisoned for his dream of freedom and equality.

His story would have been a powerful one in any season and on any day. But it was particularly powerful *that* day – for just a few hours later, I was sitting down to a *seder* on the first night of Passover. As I sat with my wife in a luxurious home, guests of a prominent Cape Town Jewish family, reciting the familiar words, “This year we are slaves, next year we will be free,” instead of Egypt my mind’s eye was filled with images of dark Robben Island.

That year, tears filled my eyes, and I knew I would never read those words the same way again. I cried not only for those who had been imprisoned and beaten, robbed of their dignity or murdered simply for their passion for freedom. I cried too for the the despair that every one of us feels at dark moments of our lives when dreams are shattered, hearts are broken, hope gives way to hopelessness.

The most powerful lesson I learned that day came from the quiet dignity and grace of Charles Mbotu. As our time at the prison came to an end, I felt compelled to ask him: How do you do this every day? How do you come back to this place of personal pain and degradation, this symbol of your own powerlessness?

“Every day,” he answered, “I come to stare my demons directly in the face without blinking. And every day, as I am walking away from this scene of past horror, I say a prayer of gratitude for the simple blessing of that day’s freedom, and cherish it all over again. I remind myself that the great Nelson Mandela emerged from the horror of this imprisonment, and instead of lashing out with his newfound power at those who had

wronged him, his heart was filled with the humility that came with a sense of awe at the miraculous, profound privilege of the opportunity to serve.”



