

Zman Matan Torateinu – A Time for Torah  
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This Shabbat, we draw even closer to the moment of our people's receiving Torah anew. Shavuot begins in one week and one day; it is the holiday that is called, "*Zman Matan Torateinu*," the time of the giving of our Torah. Our tradition understood that the Torah was given, and that it is up to us in every age to receive it, interpret it, wrestle with it, and pass on its wisdom and teachings.

This past week the Reform movement lost one of our own great teachers of Torah. If you read our special email notice, you saw that Rabbi Aaron Panken, the 12<sup>th</sup> President of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, died suddenly and tragically in a plane crash. Micah and I knew him personally. He was our teacher. Our rabbinic colleagues around the world are in mourning.

I hope that you will permit a little time for remembrance tonight, and affirmation of the significance of the Torah that Rabbi Panken spread to the Jewish world, and especially our Reform communities. As President of our Reform seminary, he influenced the Reform Jewish community that we all treasure.

After we received the news of his tragic and untimely death at the age of 53, Micah and I heard from Paul Greenberg, our temple president, and David Wang, immediate past president, who recently had the opportunity to study with Rabbi Panken at the URJ Scheidt Seminar for incoming temple presidents. Rabbi Zoob shared how Rabbi Panken once spoke at Temple Beth David on the occasion of a South Shore Union Service.

This week our community lost a leader, teacher, and a mensch. Rabbi Panken held our Reform seminary up to the highest possible standard of Torah study. A Johns Hopkins educated and trained electrical engineer, Rabbi Panken was an erudite Talmud scholar, a brilliant teacher to future rabbis, cantors and educators, and a compassionate leader. We are all here tonight thanks to the strong and visionary leadership of our movement. I will share with you just a sliver of the volumes of Torah that Rabbi Panken taught in his shortened lifetime.

In a recent new book entitled *Seven Days, Many Voices – Insights into the Biblical Story of Creation*, Rabbi Panken reflected on the second day of creation, the creation of earth and sky. He writes, "As a rabbi and student of ancient texts *and* a pilot, I admit to feeling a deep connection to these ancient ascent stories. We moderns, who leap routinely heavenward in complex tubes of beaten metal with sophisticated machinery, life-sustaining pressurization, and electronic wizardry unimaginable to the pre-modern mind, are often pretty blasé about what it takes to leave the earth's surface, climb a mile into thin air, and land a thousand miles distant... Certain aspects of flying fill me with awe every time, no matter how long or short the flight, whether I am in the cockpit or next to the bathroom in the last row of coach... Just

like God's act of Creation, the act of flying itself is remarkable." Rabbi Panken urges us to notice the wonder of life.

He goes on to teach about our human ability to continue the work of creation. "In the complexity of the mission lies another expanse we must cross: the expanse of reaching for expertise. Bringing oneself squarely up against a challenging task is a vital part of becoming fully human. Flying is but one of these sorts of tasks – it could just as easily be conducting an orchestra, deciphering a page of Talmud, painting a still life, building a congregation, racing a sailboat, performing surgery, designing a skyscraper, dancing a ballet, writing a novel, or building a computer – the truth is we become fully human when we commit our entire selves to something that is hard and worth doing, when we know our limits, and when we take pride in what we achieve. The harmony that results from diverse parts that function together suggests a oneness to the universe that is both human and beyond humanity, existing both below the expanse and above it at the same time."

And he concludes with gratitude, "The Creation story in Torah reminds us, at its core, that God's handiwork is a gift God shared with us, which implies a duty of care and an invitation to investigate... This gift of ascent within God's Creation, whether literal or figurative, is one we can never fully repay."

Micah and I got to know Aaron more when he served as scholar in residence at our congregation in Tulsa. In preparing for his visit, I spoke with him several times by phone. It was not easy to narrow down the study topics from the twenty pages or so of single spaced possible themes that he sent. But we did, and went on to the more mundane meal planning and what he might like to do during the few hours of free time in the afternoon. Take in the sights of Tulsa? Perhaps meet with the head of the Jewish Federation?

No, Rabbi Panken had another idea in mind. He had a bucket list he explained, to travel to all 50 states in the US. Oklahoma was getting him closer to his goal. But Kansas was also still on his list, just a short flight away, and he shared how he was a pilot. It turned out that a past president of our congregation was also a pilot, and we were able to arrange for their short flight to Kansas. Every time I saw Rabbi Panken after that weekend, and most recently at the CCAR conference in March, he asked me about this past president by name. This brief story illustrates how a great teacher of Torah also lives the values of Torah every day. Rabbi Panken cared about texts. Yet he cared about people even more.

Rabbi Panken most recently presided over the New York campus graduation ceremonies on May 3. His timely message will resound for years to come: "Our celebration comes, this year, amidst a particularly challenging and painful world, one that in many respects transcends anything I have seen in my lifetime... But here's the thing: the Jewish people, and our religious friends of other faiths, have seen this before, and we have lived through it, and thrived and built again and again and again. We are a people of action and courage, of innovation and fearlessness, of

adaptation and endless creativity.” And he added, “The work of our alumni continues to make an enormous difference in our world... There is nothing in the world that makes me prouder, and nothing can make me more certain of the extraordinary Jewish future we have ahead of us, than knowing who they are and what they are doing, and seeing how they have produced the next generation of committed, learned Jews, through their hard work and their wisdom.”

In true rabbinic form, Rabbi Panken left us with this hopeful and comforting message. The Reform world is in mourning this week. And rabbis mourn like everyone else. We shed tears. We hold each other up. We surround ourselves with community. The upcoming holiday of Shavuot reminds us that we all stood at Sinai together, and that we are all students and teachers of Torah. We each carry forth the light of Torah higher and higher into the heavens.

This Shabbat, we are about to conclude the reading of the third book of the Torah, the book of Leviticus, with the double portions *Behar-Bechukotai*. The book ends with a reminder of the blessings and curses of life. When life is hard, we strive even more to seek love and compassion. Now, at the end of the Book of Leviticus, we say, *chazak, chazak, v'nitchazeik*, “be strong, be strong, and let us strengthen each other.” As one book closes and another book opens, our studies of Torah continue. (Rabbi David Lyon) May our learning and our deeds inspire others, so that our legacy may live on. *Amen*.