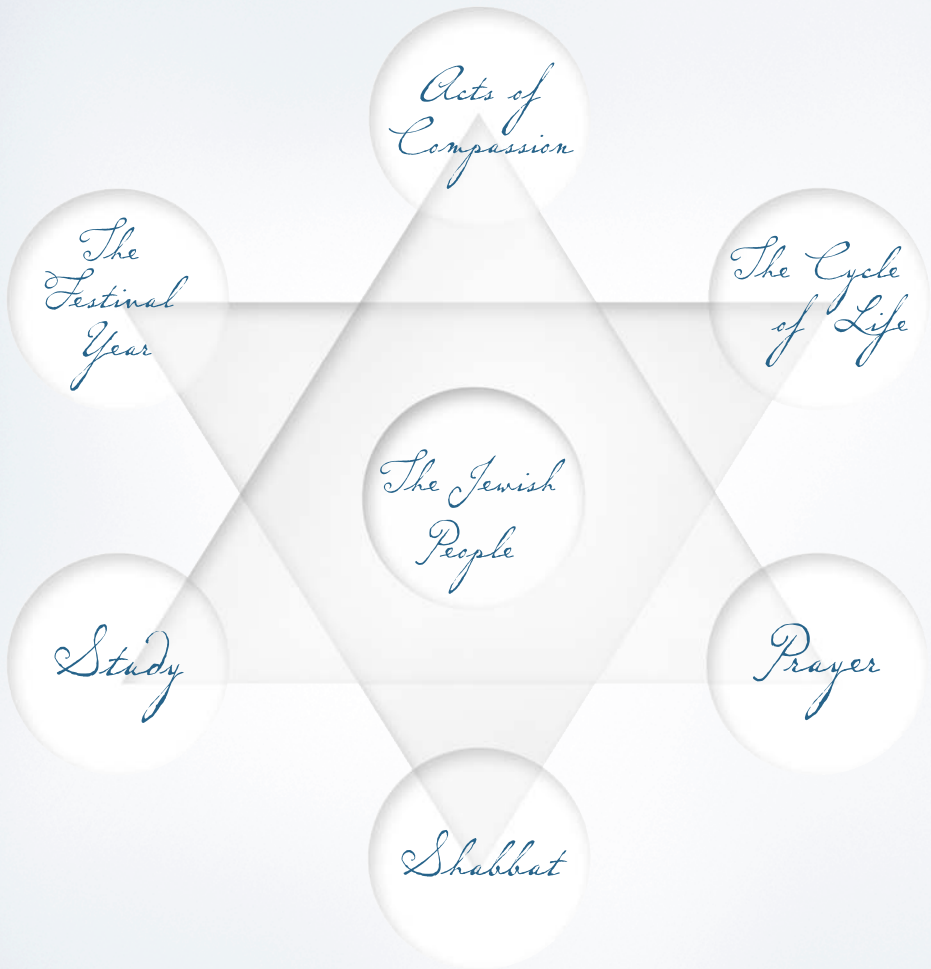


# SEVEN CIRCLES

A FRAMEWORK FOR A SHARED JEWISH LIFE



CONGREGATION B'NAI B'RITH

*Santa Barbara, California*

FIRST EDITION 2005

## BALANCING INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM AND COMMUNITY

The strength of our approach to Judaism is also its weakness.

At Congregation B'nai B'rith, each adult Jew has the freedom and the responsibility to determine what God wants from him or her. No other human being—not our parents, not our friends, not the Temple, not our rabbi—can tell us how we should live.

This philosophy fits well with the spirit of our age. Unlike Jews of ancient times or the Middle Ages, we live in a culture that exalts individual freedom. To most contemporary Jews, individual choice seems like common sense. This is the great strength of Reform Judaism.

But it is also our weakness. For if each of us is completely free to choose how we will live, then what binds us together as a community? What do we really share with each other and with other Jews throughout time and around the world? How can our philosophy lead to a shared Jewish language and a shared Jewish way of life?

As we move forward as a Jewish community, I offer this booklet as an attempt to get us talking about these questions together.

— *Rabbi Steve Cohen*

# SEVEN CIRCLES OF JEWISH LIFE

“Seven Circles” suggests a framework for a shared Jewish life, a framework that can help us think together about who we are and how we seek to live.

These seven “circles” are seven aspects of a complete Jewish life. Within each of these circles, each of us will make our own unique and personal choices. While we strive to live in all circles, each of us will probably make different choices at different times in our own life. Moreover, though we will not intentionally ignore any of the seven circles, certain ones may speak to us more strongly than others, reflecting our individuality both as persons and as a community.

How any one of us chooses to celebrate the Jewish festivals, or to pray, or to carry out acts of compassion, or to pursue life-long learning, may be radically different from many of our fellow congregants. But our shared commitment to living in some way in all seven circles will bind us to each other.

Why seven? It could just as easily have been five or six or ten. But since ancient times, seven has been the Jewish number of completeness. The seven days of the week and the seven years of the Sabbatical cycle are just two examples of the old Jewish association of seven with wholeness and holiness.

## ABOUT THIS BOOKLET

Each section of this booklet includes a short reflection on one of the seven circles, followed by a few possibilities for how an individual or a family might express that circle in their personal life, as well as some examples of what we are doing currently in that circle as a congregation. Please bear in mind that these are only examples; there is no end of possible ways of living in these seven circles.

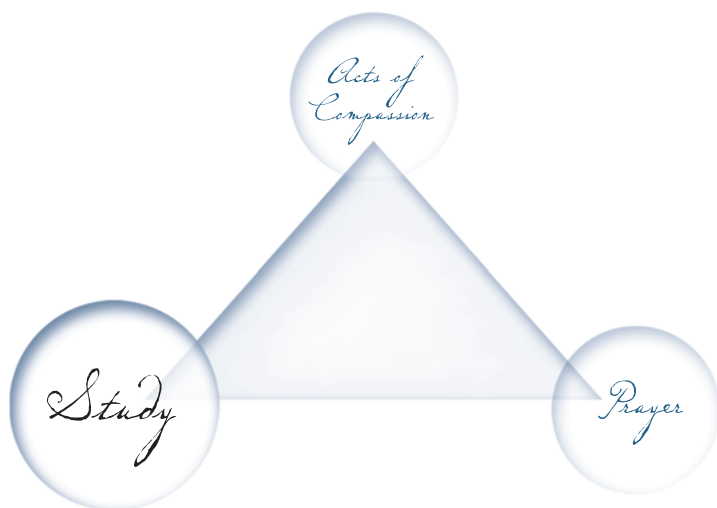
You will see that the seven circles form two triads, (one comprised of Rabbi Shimon the Righteous’ Three Pillars of Study, Prayer and Acts of Compassion, and a second containing three levels of sacred time), and a final central circle of the Jewish People. Noticing these groupings, you may find that this booklet offers you a new way of thinking about the six-pointed Jewish star.

# STUDY

We are the “People of the Book,” a nation of readers. Judaism regards study as a sacred act, in which we join our own mind to the minds of Jews throughout the ages, and thereby become part of the immortal tradition of Torah.

Study in Judaism does not mean amassing greater and greater quantities of information. Jewish study is a process of thinking, of inquiring and probing the ultimate questions of life: Who are we? What are we here for? How should we live? What can we hope for? These questions admit no final answers, and so our religion calls us to go on asking them throughout our lifetime.

Our sacred texts contain strange and wonderful stories and teachings from distant times and faraway lands. But most importantly, they offer us an honest encounter with another human soul. Perhaps the soul of a teacher who lived two thousand years ago; perhaps the soul of our study partner sitting across the text from us. In those meetings, we discover new depths of our own soul and new meaning for our own life.



## POSSIBILITIES FOR PERSONAL PRACTICE

- Find a partner for regular Jewish learning together (this is called learning in *chevruta*)
- Buy a Torah commentary and read the weekly Torah portion (chapters and verses can be found on the weekly CBB email blast)
- Arrive at services just in time for the teaching/discussion
- Subscribe to and read regularly a Jewish magazine or newspaper (e.g. *Moment*, *The Jerusalem Report*, *Reform Judaism*, *The LA Jewish Journal*)
- Bookmark and regularly visit Jewish learning websites on the internet (e.g. [www.myjewishlearning.com](http://www.myjewishlearning.com) or [www.urj.org/torah/](http://www.urj.org/torah/))
- Subscribe to the Reform Movement's daily email, "10 Minutes of Torah," at <http://urj.org/torah/ten/>.
- Teach in the CBB religious school (not for the faint of heart)
- Attend adult ed classes or lectures by guest speakers at CBB
- Learn to chant Torah or haftarah
- Buy Jewish books for your home (even if you don't read them, your children might!)

## SOME CBB PROGRAMS IN THIS CIRCLE

- Beit HaYeladim Preschool
- Religious School Kindergarten through Confirmation
- Adult Education classes:
  - Crash Course in Hebrew
  - Ordinary Mysticism
  - Torah Study
  - Lunch and Learn
  - Adult B'nai Mitzvah
  - Intro to Judaism
  - Jewish Current Events
- Saturday Morning Live monthly breakfast and speaker
- Reiger Scholar-in-Residence
- Guest teachers and speakers
- The Library!

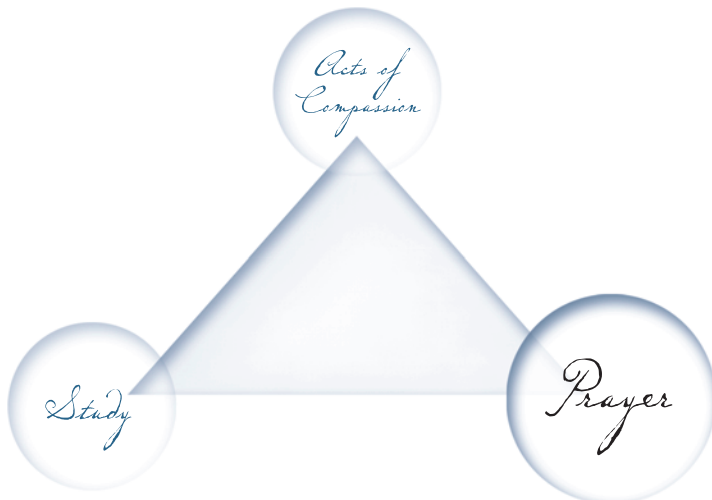
# PRAYER

The great contemporary thinker and writer Adin Steinsaltz writes that just as we swing daily between sleep and waking, so too we need to oscillate between the two opposing modes of study and prayer.

In study, he says, we question, we critique, we analyze. We ask and ask and every question is not only permitted but encouraged. In prayer, on the other hand, we let go of our questions and step out of our critical minds. In prayer we become simple and whole-hearted.

For many of us, simplicity does not come easily. We have been raised to always question both others and ourselves, and find it almost impossible to turn off the inner voice of doubt and disbelief. But Steinsaltz's insight may help us to see that a balanced Jewish life allows and even requires us to move constantly back and forth between the two equally essential modes of doubt and faith.

Each of us will find our own doorway into the mode of prayer: for many, music has the power to move us from doubt to faith. For others, silence. For yet others, the ancient poetry of our Hebrew prayer book has the power to shift our consciousness from the eager, vital, hungry mode of questioning to the still, quiet, deep mode of simplicity.



## POSSIBILITIES FOR PERSONAL PRACTICE

- Make a practice of reciting the Shma at bedtime
- Set a regular time during the day to meditate (check out *Jewish Meditation* by Aryeh Kaplan)
- Say a blessing and take a moment to think before eating
- Attend services at Temple
- Go shul-hopping. Explore the various synagogues of Santa Barbara and begin to learn what helps you pray
- Learn to wrap *tefillin* (leather phylacteries) and begin each day with *shacharit* (Jewish sunrise prayers)
- Say a *mi shebeirach* prayer for those in need of healing
- Walking alone on the beach, or in the mountains, talk out loud to God in English, sharing everything that is in your heart (this is an old Jewish practice called *hitbodedut*)
- Sitting alone or with someone you love, turn on a CD of sacred music (whatever that is to you) and allow the music to lift you to heaven

## SOME CBB PROGRAMS IN THIS CIRCLE

- Shabbat services:
  - Friday night
  - Saturday morning traditional minyan in small chapel;
  - Reform minyan in sanctuary
- Tuesday early morning service at 7AM
- Wednesday morning service at 8AM
- Worship for holy days
- Shiva minyans in private homes for families in mourning

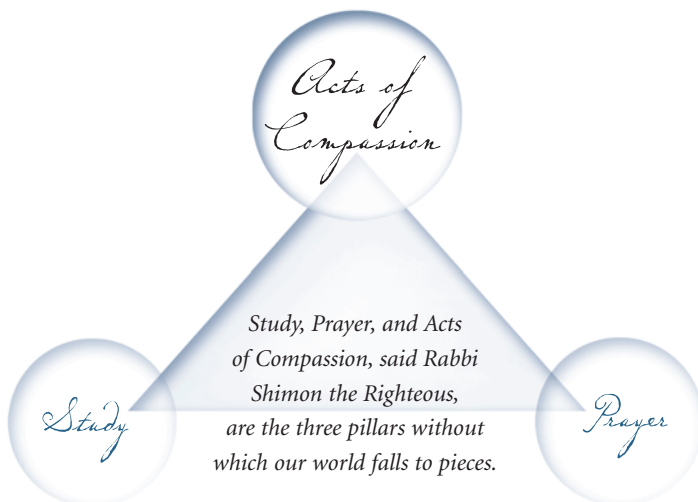
# ACTS OF COMPASSION

Musing on the mysterious purpose at the heart of human existence, Albert Einstein wrote, “one thing we do know is that we are here for each other.” “Many times a day,” he continued, “I realize how much I must give in return for all that I have received and am still receiving.”

We live together with the rest of humanity in a constant state of exchange, throughout our lives both receiving and giving sustenance, shelter, insight, courage and companionship. These exchanges may be as simple and seemingly small as a smile or a word of encouragement. Or they may be as fundamental as the meal that saves the life of a starving child.

In many of the most profound exchanges of our life, we are completely unaware of the significance of our own acts of compassion; so we should not weigh them or compare them against those of any other person.

Jewish tradition nudges and encourages us to seize the opportunity for acts of compassion that come our way: visiting the sick, inviting a lonely person into our home, helping someone find a job, extending a loan, befriending a widow/widower, supporting a soup kitchen, helping two enemies to reconcile. It is far beyond our power to eliminate all the suffering of this world, but without the ongoing giving and receiving of human acts of compassion, the world we love would collapse.





## POSSIBILITIES FOR PERSONAL PRACTICE

- Visit a friend or acquaintance in the hospital
- Offer to visit with a housebound friend, to give their family care-giver time off
- Volunteer on the Board or Committee of a non-profit
- Bring a meal to a family in mourning
- Bring a meal to a family with a newborn
- Become active in local or national politics
- Volunteer as a Big Brother or Big Sister or mentor in school
- Join one of CBB's Social Action projects (see below)
- Give *tsedakah* (charitable gifts)
- Talk with a homeless person
- Provide a loan to help someone start a business
- Provide loans to individuals in need by supporting Santa Barbara Hebrew Free Loan
- Invite a single, a widow/widower, or a newcomer to your home for Shabbat or weeknight dinner

## SOME CBB PROGRAMS IN THIS CIRCLE

- Mentoring area youth in cooperation with the Santa Barbara Symphony
- Mitzvah Day (community-wide day of volunteering around town)
- Serving meals at Transition House
- High Holy Day food drive
- Church rebuilding trip with the First United Methodist Church
- CBB Caring Community, which brings meals and friendly visits to CBB members in need
- Consciousness-raising and activism around genocide in Sudan
- Drivers bringing senior citizens to Temple on Friday night and other Temple holidays and activities

# THE FESTIVAL YEAR

Most first graders can tell you that October is the month of pumpkins, November the month of turkey, and February the month of chocolate and valentines. To be a member of a particular culture is to know viscerally the distinctive colors, images, tastes, songs and stories of each season of the year. The Jewish year has its own sequence of tastes and songs and colors. The primary festivals are seven:

PASSOVER, season of birth, of new love, freedom and matzah.

SHAVUOT, recalling a mountain in the desert on fire with the voice of God.

ROSH HASHANAH, the cry of the ram's horn and apples and honey.

YOM KIPPUR, day of fasting, purity and exaltation.

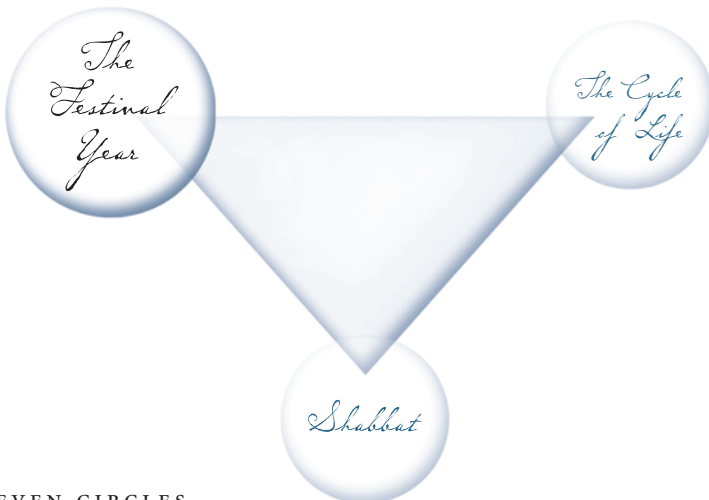
SUKKOT, magical meals under the stars in a richly decorated sukkah.

CHANUKAH, mid-winter festival of light and latkes.

PURIM, marking the end of winter with masks, costumes, and hamentaschen.

The Jewish festivals are a symphony in food, in text, in symbol and in song, expressing with outrageous humor and awesome profundity every great idea and emotion of our religion. With the holidays and their sensory messages, we initiate our children into the Jewish culture, and each year we add a chapter to the book of our own Jewish life.

It takes courage and creativity to live by the rhythms of the Jewish year in a town with a small Jewish population. With good friends, however, it becomes not only possible but fun.



## POSSIBILITIES FOR PERSONAL PRACTICE

- Take Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur seriously as a time for self-examination
- Fast on Yom Kippur
- Build a sukkah and eat your meals in it
- Invite guests (Jewish and non-Jewish) to your sukkah
- Light the Chanukah menorah all eight nights
- Bake hamentaschen on Purim and give some to your friends
- Wear a costume to Temple on Purim
- Conduct your own Passover seder
- Stay up all night studying on Shavuot
- Plant a tree/garden on Tu B'Shvat
- Have a bonfire on Lag Baomer
- Acknowledge the Jewish festivals with candles and a special meal

## SOME CBB PROGRAMS IN THIS CIRCLE

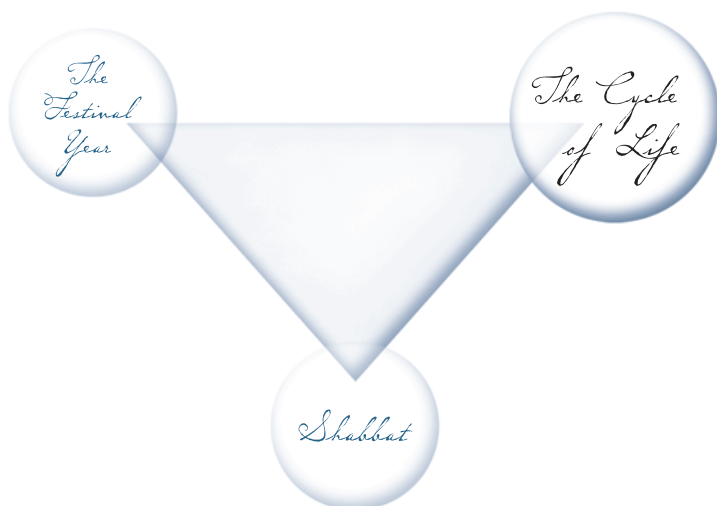
- High Holy Day services
- Tashlikh (casting sins and breadcrumbs) at Goleta Beach with the entire Santa Barbara Jewish community
- Break the Fast gatherings after Yom Kippur
- Congregational dinner on the first night of Sukkot
- Singing and dancing with the Torah on Simchat Torah
- Chanukah celebration, candle-lighting and party
- Purim megillah reading, shpiel and carnival
- Community Passover seder
- All-night Shavuot and Torah reading on the beach at sunrise
- Temple Sisterhood Gift Shop, which stocks ritual and holiday items throughout the year

# THE CYCLE OF LIFE

Our planet earth is teeming with living organisms, all inter-connected in a biological web of birth, growth, reproduction and death. We humans are part of the web.

Over the centuries, Judaism has developed life-cycle rituals which celebrate the biological reality of our lives, but which also insist that the meaning of our lives transcends biology. When a boy is born, we acknowledge the importance of biology by marking the organ of sexual reproduction; but at the same time, we give the baby (both boys and girls) their name, a sacred word which ushers them into the spiritual realm of language.

A biological event, puberty, marks the beginning of Jewish adulthood. But we celebrate puberty with initiation into Torah, the Tree of Life through which we Jews are able to live on after our own death. The pattern is the same with marriage and with death. In all our rites of passage, Judaism declares that we are of the earth: we live and die and, like all living creatures, we are driven to reproduce. But at the same time, our life cycle rituals express another truth, which is that within our living and dying bodies, lives an immortal soul.



## POSSIBILITIES FOR PERSONAL PRACTICE

- Choose a Jewish name for your child or yourself
- Have your baby boy circumcised by our local *mohel*
- Hold a baby-naming for a baby girl
- Link significant privileges and responsibilities to your child's Bar/Bat Mitzvah (e.g. decisions about bedtime, homework, allowance, chores, etc.)
- Have a Jewish wedding (e.g. ketuba, chuppah, breaking glass, bedecken, mikveh, circle dancing at the party)
- If you are not Jewish and are married to a Jew, consider converting to Judaism (the clergy are happy to discuss this)
- If you divorce, go through the Jewish ritual of the *get*
- Before death, prepare an Ethical Will (an old Jewish custom of writing down your values for your children and grandchildren)
- When death is approaching, say the *vidui* (final words) and *Shma* (family and/or clergy can help with this)
- Follow Jewish burial and mourning practices (*shiva* seven day mourning, *shloshim* thirty-day period, *yahrzeit* anniversary of passing, *yizkor* memorial prayers recited on festivals, etc).

## SOME CBB PROGRAMS IN THIS CIRCLE

- Clergy assist families with baby-namings and *brit milah* (circumcision). Special note: rabbi and cantor do not under any circumstances perform the actual circumcision!
- Baby-namings before the congregation on Friday nights
- Bar/Bat Mitzvah program includes four years of Hebrew, learning the melodies for chanting, writing a speech, and family participation in the Bnai Mitzvah educational program.
- Clergy perform weddings; congregants are encouraged to hold their wedding at the Temple
- Clergy perform funerals, memorial services
- Caring Community helps organize *shiva minyan* (gathering for prayer at home of family in mourning)
- Congregational email now informs entire congregation immediately upon the death of one of our members
- Monthly birthday blessing on first Friday night of the month
- Blessings on the bimah for anniversaries, special occasions

# SHABBAT

It may seem strange at first that observing the Sabbath is one of the Ten Commandments. Do we really need to be commanded to rest? And is rest really so important that it belongs in the “Top Ten” commandments? Yes and yes.

Our work is never done. There are always responsibilities demanding our attention. Bills to be paid and commitments to be fulfilled. A house to be repaired and calls to be answered. Because our work is never done, the Torah commands us to rest, and carves out one-seventh of our life in which we are freed from all of our “doing,” free to simply “be”...with family, with friends, by ourselves and with God.

To step out of the rat race of our work lives once every seven days can at first be terribly difficult. We may feel guilty, imagining that we are being lazy or irresponsible. And so the Torah commands us to observe the Shabbat, and with that command the Torah sets us free.

## POSSIBILITIES FOR PERSONAL PRACTICE

- Light candles and say blessings at home on Friday night
- Avoid spending money on Shabbat
- Designate Friday night (or Saturday some time) as family time
- Come to Temple for services
- Set aside a regular time on Saturday for a walk, or to read a Jewish book
- Take a nap on Saturday afternoon (rabbi’s personal recommendation)
- Make the four-minute *havdalah* ritual marking the end of Shabbat a regular habit on Saturday night

## SOME CBB PROGRAMS IN THIS CIRCLE

- Regular Friday and Saturday gatherings for prayer and study
- Spectacular oneg Shabbats
- Tot Shabbat once a month
- Weekly Taste of Shabbat with preschoolers
- Monthly community Shabbat dinners
- Saturday Morning Live breakfast and speaker program
- Shabbaton retreat weekend in February

# THE JEWISH PEOPLE

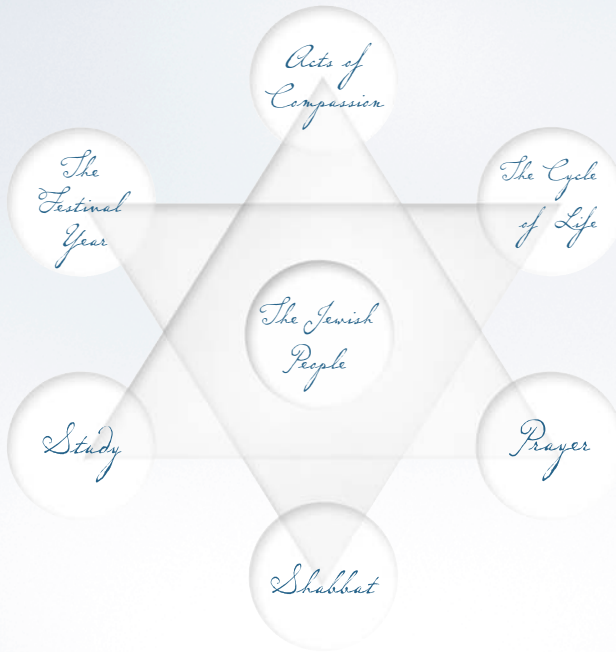
The Jews are a family. All of us (including converts) are descended from the first parents Abraham and Sarah. And while we acknowledge our kinship with the entire human race, we maintain our identity as an old tribe, a noisy, argumentative, at times dysfunctional, at times remarkable family: the Children of Israel, the Jewish People. Within the circle of the Jewish people we each make our own intensely personal decisions about Jewish identity. We explore our relationship to the miraculous and complex Jewish society being built in Israel, our ancient homeland, and also seek a meaningful response to the Holocaust and other outbreaks of violence against Jews throughout history. Each of us attempts to piece together an identity that simultaneously honors our Jewish heritage and affirms our inter-connectedness with our non-Jewish friends and neighbors.

## POSSIBILITIES FOR PERSONAL PRACTICE

- Keep *The Big Book of Jewish Humor* in your bathroom, rent and watch *Schindler's List*, or buy and listen to CDs of Jewish music
- Travel to Israel
- Avoid eating pork or shellfish
- Learn some conversational Hebrew
- Wear a *chai* necklace
- Send your child to Jewish summer camp
- Make a hefty donation to CBB, SB Jewish Federation, Hadassah, Hillel or other worthy Jewish organization
- Put a *mezuzah* on your doorframe.
- Sing songs from *Fiddler on the Roof* in the shower

## SOME CBB PROGRAMS IN THIS CIRCLE

- The Role Model and other dramatic performances
- Congregational trip to Israel (July 2006!)
- Israeli dancing with Phillip Feldman
- Sisterhood Mah Jongg tournament
- Welcome Baslets to new members
- Shira concert
- SBORTY (Santa Barbara Organization of Reform Temple Youth)
- Movie and Chinese dinner on *Erev Christmas*
- *Chavurot*, our system of surrogate extended families



If you would like to discuss your own  
SEVEN CIRCLES OF JEWISH LIFE,  
please contact Rabbi Cohen ([rabbi@cbbsb.org](mailto:rabbi@cbbsb.org)),  
Cantor Childs ([cantor@cbbsb.org](mailto:cantor@cbbsb.org)),  
or Craig Rosen ([cbbeducator@aol.com](mailto:cbbeducator@aol.com)).  
Or call us at (805) 964-7869.

If you would like to volunteer in our  
congregation's Seven Circles Programs,  
contact Karen Greenberg at (805) 964-7869  
or Volunteer Coordinator Bernice Gelberg  
at (805) 964-8939 and they will put you  
in touch with the right committee chair.

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