One year ago I sat down to write my first At the Gates. As I prepare this first CCAR Journal of 2020—the fifth issue of my tenure—I am filled with pride in and gratitude for the year that has passed, and I hope that the Journal has served as a source of learning, inspiration, and meaning over the past twelve months.

Since the winter of 2019, the CCAR Journal has published three theme issues: A scholarly issue dedicated to the memory of our Rabbi Aaron Panken, a symposium on Politics and the Rabbinate, and a comprehensive edition on Spiritual and Mental Wellness. This winter marks a return to what we call a “general” issue—a wonderfully diverse (dare I say wonderfully eclectic?) mix of subjects, styles, and scholarship—united in little besides the quality of the work and the talent of the authors.

Our issue opens with three papers that seek timely wisdom in our most timeless texts. Exploring the laws of kol ishah and the stories of Dinah and Batsheva in light of #MeToo, Micah Streiffer and Judith Schindler elevate our understanding of rape, assault, and power in the biblical period as well as our own. “Only by listening to the women of the past,” Streiffer and Schindler observe, “can we truly listen to the women of the present.” In his article on Abraham—God’s first friend—Leigh Lerner sensitively mines biblical and Rabbinic literature for contemporary guidance on the essential attributes of friendship and intimacy, finding that Judaism provides “a heritage and a way of behaving that teaches how to be a best friend.” Finally, I include my own paper—entitled “Mean Rabbis”—that contains the only epigraph in CCAR Journal history to quote both Rav Judah and Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle author Betty MacDonald.

Personal encounters with God and religion animate the next selection of articles, anchored by Kenneth D. Roseman’s groundbreaking survey of members of six different congregations, illuminating their experiences with God as the source of nature, relationships, healing, and more. “There is a cadre within our ranks who have something really powerful to say about God,” he concludes. “There is a hidden depth of spiritual experience that we ought to
be tapping.” William (Bill) Cutter thoughtfully reveals the private face of our colleague of blessed memory, Harvey J. Fields, whose cache of original poetry was found after his death and whose writing not only reflects a rich inner life but also offers new insight into the work of other contemporary poets. And speaking of poetry, Professor Naomi Sokoloff makes her Journal debut with a brilliant, engaging study of five poems linked by images of the tallit—“a marker of spiritual relationship, of desired nearness to the divine,” she writes, “… meant to demarcate borders between the sacred and the profane, self and community.”

The opportunities and the dangers posed by a revival of interest in Martin Buber are the subject of Neal Gold’s review essay. While unflinchingly examining how Buber’s ambivalence about Israel and emphasis on spirituality could result in “bad news for the Jewish community,” Gold also makes a compelling case that his call for genuine dialogue and meaningful encounter “truly could save us all.” Also focusing on our relationship with Israel are rabbinical students Michael Lewis and Samuel Stern, who comprehensively review the concept of redemption in Jewish history and liturgy before surveying how different movements—and different siddurim—respond to an essential question: What role does the State of Israel play in redemption? And while the pollution of the Temple in Jerusalem by idolaters, and the process of repurification, might not appear topics of urgent import, Glenn Jacob repurposes them in his call for a new Jewish theology of climate change. With a unique combination of scholarship and innovation, Jacob makes clear that this “new theology must explicate humanity’s relationship to God’s creation, but also compel [us] to act.”

Steven Lebow also looks back at classic text—specifically, M’chilta D’Rabbi Yishmael—to analyze not only the ancient figure of Jethro but also what our Sages’ treatment of his story can teach us about proselytization, the importance of welcome, and how we might “open [our] doors wide and bring close what we now call the Jews-by-choice.” Perhaps fittingly, then, our final three articles look both to and outside the Jewish canon to address their themes: First, David J. Zucker offers a meticulously researched examination of the Samson narrative as related by Josephus, explaining how its “treasury of biblical tropes” elicited the interest of both Jewish and non-Jewish readers while also serving as “a defense of Jews and Judaism.” In his Journal debut, Professor
Admiel Kosman explores what he calls “theological ‘black holes’” and how these “holes” can function as “traps” serving to justify human evil. When our editorial board first received this article—focused primarily around religious texts in Buddhism and Islam—we wondered if its content and lessons would be right for the Journal. After a single reading, we were convinced. Finally, we offer a follow-up to Richard Damashek’s most recent article for the Journal; this paper further considers the connection between Babylonia and the development of Judaism, and extends to affinities with Persia as well. “There is a certain irony in the fact that the Bible begins in Babylon with the creation story,” he notes, “and returns to Babylon near the end of the biblical story of Israel.”

Calling upon his traditional Eastern European childhood as well as his socialist convictions, David Cohen reinterpreted some of our most familiar Torah stories in light of the secular Zionist enterprise. These striking—and strikingly relevant—di’vrei Torah are expertly translated by Lenn Schramm and, as Netta Schramm observes in her perceptive commentary, “show a breadth of cultural and educational engagement with Jewish texts previously not recognized in the kibbutz movement.”

Wonderful diversity is also a hallmark of this issue’s book reviews: An examination from Suzanne Singer of Marcia Falk’s new book of illuminated blessings and poetry, and a reading of essays on hospice work written by chaplain Jonathan Katz, who firsthand experiences the burdens and blessings of this vocation. Our final book review also serves as a bridge to our poetry section as Bruce Black analyzes Climbing a Question, the new collection by esteemed Journal poet Roger Nash.

You may recall that in my first At the Gates, I shared my plan to expand and enhance the Journal’s selection of poetry; and I hope you have noticed and appreciated the many talented poets who have contributed. In this issue, we welcome seven extraordinary poets (all women, incidentally) whose voices are new to these pages. Elaine Terranova, Elaine Elinson, and Judith Skillman beautifully evoke family and history, while familiar holidays, liturgy, and biblical tales take original and inspiring shape in the poems of Stephanie Friedman, Carol Dorf, and Lori Levy. And in the closing selection of poems, we have the opportunity to experience the work of Carol V. Davis—who is not only a gifted poet but who has
also urged her most gifted colleagues to submit their own writings to the Journal.

Before inviting you to turn the page and delve into the wisdom and creativity that await, I encourage you to “Join the Conversation” and deepen your connection with the CCAR Journal. That could mean sharing an article or poem with a family member, colleague, or friend; reading one of the books recommended by our reviewers; setting aside time to sit down with the Journal and a mug of hot tea (it will prove time well spent, I promise!), or even reaching out with a submission, an idea for a submission, or an inquiry about serving as an editing or writing mentor. The editorial board and I would love to hear from you!

With gratitude for the honor of serving as editor, and with prayers for a season of light and blessing, hope and miracles, comfort and redemption,

Elaine Rose Glickman, Editor