Where Was the Fall Issue?

I appreciate the emails, Facebook messages, and phone calls that I received from so many of you asking this question. Our dedicated and talented editorial board, authors, and staff work hard to educate, intrigue, and inspire our readers; and while we were disappointed not to publish a Fall 2020 issue of the CCAR Journal, we were also gratified to hear that you noticed, and that you missed us!

You have likely already guessed the answer: Due to financial constraints caused by the coronavirus pandemic, the CCAR Journal published only three issues in 2020, and we plan to publish only three this year as well. In the face of all the suffering and death wrought by COVID-19, two lost issues of the Journal might seem a sacrifice hardly worth mentioning. Yet we are sad to postpone the publication of our colleagues’ articles, book reviews, and poetry, and to miss out on opportunities to engage with you, our wonderful readers. We thank you for sticking with us, and we look forward to better times ahead!

In the meantime, we are proud and delighted to present this Fall 2020/Winter 2021 issue. In its opening pages, you will find the first fruits of poetry editor Marc Steven Dworkin’s longtime dream: a symposium of Jewish short fiction, written by our colleagues and outstanding professional authors. Working with Marc to envisage, publicize, and curate this symposium was among my most exciting and fulfilling experiences as a rabbi; his devotion to and passion for literature, as well as his vision and brilliance as an editor, are unparalleled. In addition to presenting new work by widely published and award-winning authors Jonathan Wilson, Elizabeth Edelglass, Howard Schwartz, Matthue Roth, Roger Nash, Nancy Lefenfeld, and Elaine Terranova, we invite you to see a new side of our rabbinic colleagues Ruth Gais, Simeon J. Maslin, Stacey Blank, Oren J. Hayon, Stephen S. Pearce, and James Stone Goodman as they share their own short stories. As you prepare to dive into this section, please know that some selections contain mature themes,
profanity, and other elements you are otherwise unlikely to encounter in the CCAR Journal. We trust that you will nevertheless enter in peace and depart in peace. Enjoy!

In addition to our short fiction, we are happy to publish seven articles that also explore literature in all of its variety and power. Thematically, this section begins at the ultimate beginning, with Edward Zerin’s fascinating examination of the Tel Zayit Abecedary, thought to be the first known inscription of the full Hebrew alphabet. Sarah Grabiner—in her remarkable and auspicious Journal debut—and Adam D. Fisher beautifully mix past and present by, respectively, tracing the impact of Psalm 130 on contemporary Hebrew literature, and demonstrating how ancient metaphors in the Bible and siddur enable us to encounter the Divine in our own time. Applying more modern teachings to our search for meaning, Admiel Kosman makes a welcome return to the Journal with a compelling study of Viktor Frankl’s work and its implications for our spiritual seeking; and Elliot B. Gertel surveys the work of Mordecai Kaplan, Hermann Cohen, Jay Michaelson, and Arthur Green—among others—to critique nondualistic theology and suggest a meaningful alternative. And as we return to the twenty-first century, Mary L. Zamore insightfully, and incisively, reviews two significant books—She Said and Catch and Kill—and explores what they have meant for the #MeToo movement, and what they must mean for our Jewish community. My own article follows her important essay and is in large part inspired by her work.

But there is yet more! Our flourishing Maayanot section brings to you an incredible glimpse into the thirteenth-century Sefer Mitzvot Katzeir—“a teaching and study guide and a book of ethical inspiration”—as translated and analyzed by Steven Lebow, and Yiddish poet Avraham Sutzkever’s heartbreaking “A Jewish Poet’s Poem in 1943,” with Israel Zoberman’s translation and commentary. We also consider new works of contemporary Jewish interest in essential book reviews written by David J. Zucker, Joel Soffin, Daniel S Alexander, Rachel Sabath Beit-Halachmi, and Wendy Pein, and explore the figure of the toshav tzedek in Reeve Robert Brenner’s response to our symposium on conversion in the Summer 2020 issue. Finally, Dina Elenbogen and Philip Terman make their Journal debuts alongside returning contributors Judith Skillman and Roger Nash and rabbinic colleagues Edward Zerin and Herbert Bronstein in another magnificent selection of poetry.
In my very first “At the Gates,” I shared how much it meant to be named editor-in-chief of the CCAR Journal—in no small measure because my own beloved rabbi, Rabbi Samuel E. Karff, had served in the same role. When he died in August, I felt bereft—and blessed beyond measure to have grown up with him as my rabbi, and to have become colleagues and friends (though I could never, ever bring myself to call him Sam). In remembrance of this past editor-in-chief of the CCAR Journal, this gadol hador, this inspiring and brilliant rabbi, and this good and kind mensch, I am honored to share azkarot written by those who were similarly blessed—those for whom Rabbi Karff was a childhood rabbi or an early mentor and colleague. I hope you will appreciate and enjoy them.

Zecher tzadik livracha.

Rabbi Justus Baird: Small moments can become important memories. When I was 21, I started attending the more traditional Shabbat morning minyan at Beth Israel. The lay leaders who ran the minyan asked me to read Torah. I was on the path to conversion but not Jewish yet, though my Hebrew was strong after studying in Jerusalem for a year. I consulted with Sam Karff. Could a non-Jew read Torah in his shul? He gave the green light. His permission felt like a spiritual endorsement.

Later, when considering rabbinical school, I asked him if he ever considered a different career path. “Oh yes!” he replied. “I always wanted to be a sports announcer on the radio.” And when we discovered our summer vacation spots were just a few miles apart in northern Michigan, I visited his retreat and learned from him how he split his day between study and dedicated family time. But what stands out the most is Rabbi Karff’s menschiness. Somehow, he was able to combine gravitas with powerful attention to the person at hand, a rare and irresistible mix.

Rabbi Barry H. Block: My first recollection of Sam Karff as “my” rabbi was a meeting in his study at the beginning of my bar mitzvah preparation, during his first months in Houston. I do not remember what he said, but I do know how he made my parents and me feel. Throughout my own rabbinate, “the first b/mitzvah meeting” in my office has been an attempt on my part to provide a fraction of the meaningful moment he gave my parents and me.
Rabbi Karff opened my teenage mind to God, telling a story that I now repeat in his name to Confirmation classes each year, and which he told to mine in 1978–1979. Sitting in the outdoor chapel at Olin-Sang-Ruby Union Institute, his daughters pressed close to him, Sam realized that he could feel their hearts beating in sync with his own at the very moment that they sang V’ahavta (“with all your heart”). For an instant, he experienced God’s presence. That story illustrates the divinity he experienced in his love for his daughters and theirs for him, and it enables others—for four-plus decades now, including me—to experience God.

As I began to consider and then prepare for the rabbinate, Sam would invite me for lunch in his study whenever I was in Houston. He was interested in what I was doing and learning. He also gifted me with the truth, telling me what I needed to hear, whether pleasing to my ears in that moment or not.

These gifts are crowned with perhaps Sam’s greatest legacy—the Shlenker School, named in my grandfather’s memory but entirely Sam’s vision—for me, a symbol that will always link me to “my” rabbi.

Cantor Robert Gerber: Here are some lessons and memories from Sam Karff:

He used to say: Don’t point a finger at people because there will be three pointing back at you; Reform Judaism has been serving up too weak a mead to our congregants; and perception was as important as reality.

Sam always spoke in full sentences. He didn’t speak until the thought was fully formed in his mind. He was elegant but not verbose. When he spoke, the language rolled over the listener; and the words, his choice of words, felt like velvet on your skin. He was old-fashioned: his sermons were twenty minutes long. First, he told you what he was going to say. Then he fleshed it out, and finally he recapitulated the important points. He almost never spoke about politics. If he wanted to make a political point, he would first tell you what the Torah or the Mishnah or a rabbi’s d’rash expounded about the issue; and without divulging his personal opinion, he would let the listener decide for themselves the conclusion he wanted them to draw in the beginning. Every Yamim Noraim, people didn’t ask how the holidays went; they would primarily discuss which sermon everyone thought was the best.
Under Sam’s leadership the congregation grew to almost two thousand families from eight hundred. People would join just so that they could get close to Sam.

When I first joined Beth Israel, I was a fifth-year student at HUC-JIR. I would fly in every two weeks. Since I had no home or family, the Karffs sort of adopted me. I was invited to their home almost every Friday night for dinner. Sam and especially Joan were gracious hosts and always made me feel welcome. After dinner, the conversation was often far-ranging. It often consisted of the weekly parashah, but when it veered off into topics that made Sam uncomfortable, like social mores, he would politely excuse himself to work on his sermon and exit the room.

Sam adored his family, and they him. He recognized that he was blessed in his marriage, and his affection was palpable. Joan was a perfect rabbi’s wife in so many ways. Not the least of which was that as good as Sam’s memory was (and it was great—he remembered almost everyone’s name and story), the ones he forgot, she remembered. They were a formidable team.

I remember the day when Sam called me because he had a problem. He wanted to cook something on the grill outside, but he didn’t know how to turn it on.

Sam had two other clerical friends in the community. One was Reverend William Lawson, and the other the head of the Houston-Galveston Archdiocese, Bishop Joseph Fiorenza. They were called the Three Amigos, and together they were a strong force for human rights in Houston. They started the Campaign for the Homeless, and many other very successful programs. Last year I called Sam just to check in, and he shared with me that one of the three was upset because the city of Houston didn’t have a public defender, and the less fortunate didn’t have adequate counsel when they were accused of a crime. Together they made a presentation to the city council, and the council were convinced to fund an office of public defender. He was as excited as a small kid with a new toy.

Rabbi Brenner Glickman: In my first year as an assistant rabbi, I received a call at home on a Saturday morning. The woman had a question about the funeral the next day. I told that I did not know, because Rabbi Karff was the rabbi officiating. “I know,” she said, “but I would never call the rabbi on Shabbat.”
I could hardly blame her. Rabbi Karff was the holiest person I have ever known. He was deeply faithful, mild in temperament, kind and thoughtful. He came into my life first through my wife as her rabbi, and then he became my rabbi as well. Though I would work with him as a junior colleague, I never called him Sam. Ever. I did not want to. I had plenty of friends and rabbi friends. I only had one rabbi.

Twenty years later he still influences me in my rabbinate. When faced with a predicament, I will sometimes ask myself what Rabbi Karff would do. We are different, of course, but alike enough that he inspires me, in ways he could never know. In fact, that is one of his greatest teachings he left to me as a rabbi. He showed me the impact that we can have on people even when we are not in direct contact with them or have not seen them in years.

When I hear from someone who feels a profound connection to me because of some interaction we had years ago, I understand. I get it. I had a rabbi, too.

Rabbi Neil Hirsch: In the fourth grade, the teacher who oversaw the school newspaper assigned me to the religion beat. I was a student at the Irving M. Shlenker School, Houston’s Reform Jewish day school, located on the campus of Congregation Beth Israel. Covering this beat meant that I was supposed to interview the synagogue’s clergy about their roles. The teacher set up the appointments, and a few days later, I was dismissed to the senior rabbi’s study. I had known Rabbi Samuel E. Karff for my entire life; he was our family’s rabbi, but this would be the first time I would have a personal conversation with him.

For the interview, my father lent me his dictaphone to record the conversation. After some nice back and forth, I cut right to it: “What do you like about being a rabbi?” I asked. Rabbi Karff, in his abundant patience, kindness, and love, told me all about what he did: that he loved to spend time with people when they needed help, that he liked reading and writing, and that he was especially fond of telling stories to children. I recently found the recording of this conversation, and in it, you can hear Rabbi Karff describe the call of the congregational rabbi, to which the nine-year-old version of me says, “Oh, that’s cool.” I wonder if that conversation sowed the seeds of my rabbinate.
When I remember Rabbi Karff, I think of that moment in the interview, and of the sermon he delivered at a CCAR conference that he would later publish as “The Soul of the Rav.” I first read “The Soul of the Rav” in an early year at HUC. Since then, I have read it at least once a year to remind myself of the mission of the congregational rabbi: namely, to give care and compassion to those in need, to study and to teach, and to tell good stories to children. Rabbi Karff and I would go on to send letters and emails to one another over the years, especially once I was a student at HUC. When I sent him a copy of my senior sermon, he replied with some constructive criticism and support, and finished by saying, “I’m glad you chose the rabbinate, even though you would have been a superb journalist.” I imagine him smiling as he wrote that.

Rabbi Karff was a rabbi’s rabbi. For those of us whom he guided, mentored, and taught, we have so many stories. And each one, I pray, tells of a man whose heart and soul were guided by what it means to be a Rav.

Rabbi Stephanie Kramer: “I the Lord am your God, Who led you out of Egypt to be your God. I the Lord am your God.”

And as a preschooler, I absolutely believed that Rabbi Karff was God. He was tall, kind, impeccably dressed, smiled, and had the best stories. When he raised his hands and recited these words, mi Sinai, he was God. Or so every preschooler believed.

Almost forty years later, I can still close my eyes and picture him in the aisle of our round chapel, with light radiating in from all directions through the stained-glass windows, telling a brilliant story, with an ending that inspired goodness and justice. These stories have stuck with me through the years.

It wasn’t until recently that I learned one of Rabbi Karff’s many passions was writing children’s stories. He felt that storytelling was an art that every rabbi needed to master, and therefore he encouraged his associate rabbis to polish their storytelling skills. It’s no wonder that I remember Rabbi Karff through stories.

And therefore, when it became obvious that all High Holy Day services would be virtual, I wanted to make sure that the story told in the children’s service was as engaging as possible. I wanted children to be drawn in. I wanted to capture their
attention—and what better way than with a cartoon, or animated story. So I reached out to Rabbi Karff for permission to animate his famous High Holy Day story, “The Land of No Second Chances.”

Of course, he was generous with granting permission, and particularly in making sure his words stayed the same. It brought a smile to my face, knowing that each and every word of the story was placed with precision and care. I am so grateful we were able to talk that day. He asked me how the rabbinate was treating me during such an unusual time, and I complained about how hard it was to lead into an empty camera rather than a filled sanctuary. And just as a rabbi’s rabbi, he taught me a lesson I will carry with me for the rest of my days.

He told me as a retired rabbi, looking backward at a long rabbinate and years of sermons, he doesn’t remember or look back as fondly on all the “big” “important” sermons he gave. Rather he remembered the children’s faces while he told stories.

Rabbi David A. Lyon: Before Sam led others, he led himself. In his book Permission to Believe (p. 113), he came to a personal conclusion: “I am of worth even though sometimes I mess up or fail, because I am created in the image of God . . . I should focus, not on whether I will succeed or fail, but on doing the task I am intended to do with all my heart, as an offering to my Creator. I must believe that if I do all I can, God, the redeemer and helper, will somehow sustain me.”

In aggadah, he found what he called “a covenant grounded in an enduring tension between God’s demanding justice and unconditional love” (Agada, p. 291). Reform Judaism, he believed, was uniquely prepared to provide structure and autonomy to answer moral and religious questions for our times, while assuring us that guilt was not a prerequisite for redemption.

At the end of Sam’s memoir, he wrote, “For persons of religious faith, our ultimate source of meaning is that we live in the presence of our Creator, who has made known to us the way we should live, who is active in our lives . . . and who will be with us and embrace us when we have crossed the threshold from life on earth to Eternity” (Memoir, p. 396).

God was surely with Sam, to embrace him when he crossed the threshold. May peace be a sacred gift for a life well-lived.
Rabbi Arthur Nemitoff: I served as Sam’s colleague from 1981–1983. While I learned much during those brief two years—at times it felt like I was drinking out of a fire hose—that which had the most impact on me was Sam’s private life.

Being single at the time and knowing no one in Houston, I was often invited by Sam and Joan to Shabbat and holiday dinners. This gave me the unusual privilege of watching for an hour or so during many Shabbat dinners, as Sam navigated the role of husband, father, mentor, and colleague.

While we never spoke about it even in later years, it proved to be the model I followed long after I moved beyond his lessons about sermons or life cycles or congregational leadership. All of those other things were just that—things/skills—while what he did at home spoke volumes of what it meant to be a mensch in the truest sense of the word.

I witnessed an individual who walked lightly in this world—in regard to his family—offering gentle love and clear perspective. I saw a man who loved family, who welcomed a young colleague as family, and who brought his family’s worlds, worries, and words to the Shabbat table. When we were at Beth Israel, Sam was the center. When we sat around the table, everyone else took center stage.

Sam officiated at my wedding. And before the ceremony, he offered me one piece of advice. He said: “Always remember what makes you whole.” He didn’t need to share those words. I saw them each time I was privileged to dine at his and Joan’s table. Some forty years later, I continue to hold fast to that teaching.

_Zecher tzadik livracha._

Rabbi Stephen Stein: Sam was my rabbi and mentor, but one day, we became equals. Our home was devastated by a Houston flood, just a couple of months after I left for Jerusalem. When I came back home to pick up the pieces of our lives, Sam asked me to come see him. I walked into his office, he hugged me—for a long while—and then said, “Stephen, I am sorry, but now we are members of the same club.” Having recently lost his own home in an accidental fire, he knew the trauma—and as always, Sam also knew how to teach, counsel, and comfort—all while simply being present—with me, with the moment, and with our God. His memory WILL be for blessing.
Rabbi David A. Whiman: Sam Karff was a master of the pulpit. His was a model of intelligent, informative, and inspirational Jewish preaching. Listening to his articulate, relevant, and mellifluously delivered message Sabbath after Sabbath offered compelling proof for what preaching could accomplish. His was a continuing demonstration of the power and appeal of a dependably engaging weekly effort. His High Holy Day sermons were quietly breathtaking. In an age suspicious of sustained thought, he modeled for his assistants how it was possible to use words well, and that if we did so our congregations would be willing to listen if not always agree. By his example, he taught how to communicate effectively, moreover inspirationally, in a medium that is today wrongly and too often denigrated as finished. I miss his sermons.

Elaine Rose Glickman, Editor