

# Rabbinic Intern Guest Teaching

February 24, 2017

*This week's teaching is provided by Chaya Bender, a rabbinical student at the Jewish Theological Seminary and one of Temple Shalom's rabbinic fellows. Chaya earned a Bachelor of Arts in Anthropology with two minors in Near Eastern and Judaic Studies and Gender Studies from Brandeis University, In addition to rabbinic ordination, she is pursuing a Masters Degree at the William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education. She has been teaching for more than ten years in various Jewish settings for learners of all age and is passionate about helping others explore Judaism through the lens of art. She also enjoys playing music and hosting Shabbat meals with her wife, Emily.*

*Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Mitch*

---

*"Always listen to Sifu (Master). Use Kung Fu to help people, not to hurt. Never, ever, ever, ever, ever, EVER hit someone in anger. Life is precious!"*

—The "Four Rules of Kung Fu" according to Hazel Bender, age 4

My four-year-old sister, Hazel, leads a very exciting life. She loves collecting pinecones to make recycled crafts. She has a giant velociraptor toy named Toenail who keeps her company on long car rides. Also, she is on her way to becoming a Kung Fu master.

She started learning Wing Chun Kung Fu a few months ago, and I recently had the privilege of attending one of her lessons. As we walked through the front door, I watched my baby sister, who is usually bouncing off of the walls with energy, quietly and slowly enter the room and hang her coat over her chair. What was it that transformed Hazel from wild preschooler to reserved Kung Fu student? It was the set of rules Hazel had learned from her teacher, along with the values and boundaries by which to live contained in those rules.

2,000 years ago in China, a Shaolin nun observed a chaotic fight between a crane and a snake. By interpreting the lessons of the fight, she translated the chaos she had observed into the laws of martial arts. The nun transmitted these laws to her student, a young woman named Yim Wing Chun, who founded the Kung Fu that Hazel practices today.

In this week's *parasha*, *Parashat Mishpatim*, the Jewish people are given a detailed list of ethical and religious laws, including murder charges, property rights, heresy and pilgrimage festivals. The rabbis note the contrast between this *parasha* and the one that had proceeded it, which describes the giving of the Ten Commandments during the Revelation at Sinai. At this crucial moment, the governing forces of the world were broken. During the Revelation at Sinai, the people were able to see sounds and hear sights.

The laws in this week's *parasha*, therefore, were necessary to help the people interpret the chaotic experience of Revelation. Moses, not fearing the power of Revelation, drew close to God and translated God's language into what a human could understand: 105 verses of practical "do's" and "do not's." God speaks in an incomprehensible language to the human ear. We can't really comprehend what it means to see sounds and hear sights, but we can understand the charge to treat one's worker fairly or to let a field lie fallow once every seven years.

Living in America in 2017, we are the recipients of many forms of received traditions that at the time of their conception thoughtfully interpreted the unknowable into laws. For Hazel, Wing Chun Kung Fu instills in her a deep sense of respect for herself, her body and her teachers that are in many ways beyond her ability to comprehend as a four-year-old, and yet these forces govern her actions. For the Jewish people as a whole, Ahad Ha'am famously said, "More than the Jews have kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath has kept the Jews." Whether or not Jews made a habit of observing Shabbat each and every week, the concept of Shabbat, working hard for something while also setting up a boundary between work and rest, is a Jewish value.

Laws serve as an interpretive lens through which we view and interact with the chaos of the world. The important thing is to keep learning and discovering, whether you do so via Kung Fu or the Torah, and in doing so you will have the opportunity to relive Revelation daily.