

LIVING JUDAISM

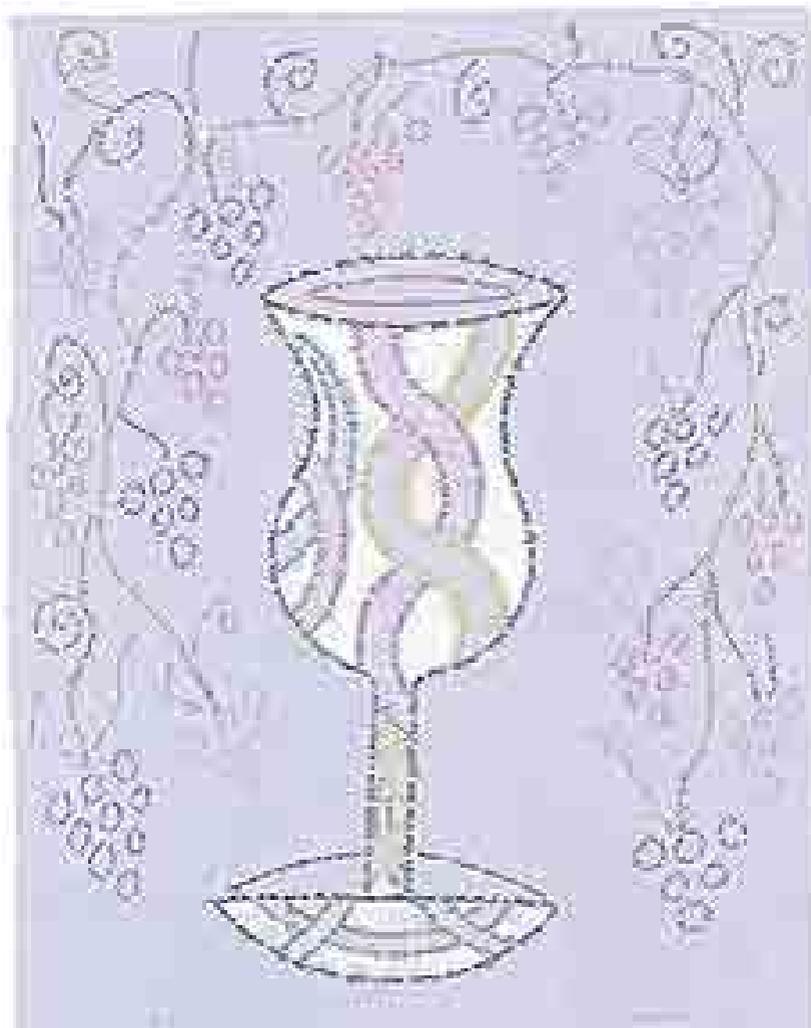
THE KEY PRINCIPLES OF PROGRESSIVE JEWISH LIFE





contents

- 5 Introduction
- 7 Our mission
- 8 Creation
- 9 Inclusiveness
- 10 Torah
- 11 Derekh Eretz
- 12 Mitzvot
- 13 Halachah
- 14 Prayer
- 15 Shabbat
- 16 Festivals
- 18 Kashrut
- 19 Social justice
- 20 Rabbi
- 21 Patrilineal descent
- 22 Conversion
- 23 Life-cycle events
- 24 Israel
- 25 Kehillah
- 27 List of illustrations



Introduction

Just as the different wicks of the Havdallah (הבדלה)* candle come together to make one glorious light, the various strands of Judaism combine to offer the world belief in one God, a set of values that form the basis for civil society, and a commitment to make the world a better place. We believe that the respectful recognition of diversity and difference can enable us to contribute positively to the development of our culture and our world.

This booklet will outline the key aspects of the overarching light that Judaism offers the world and, more specifically, it will describe the values and practices that highlight the Progressive strand of Judaism.

** The Havdallah candle consists of several intertwined wicks. The candle is lit at the end of Shabbat to highlight the difference (Hevdel: הבדל) between the Shabbat and the remainder of the week.*



Our Mission

The Union for Progressive Judaism exists to promote Progressive Judaism, honour our spiritual and communal traditions, inform the present and guide the future of our communities in the Australian, Asian and New Zealand region by:

- Establishing and strengthening synagogues, schools and youth groups wherever there are Jews in this region searching for meaningful access to and expression of modern Jewish values and life;
- Encouraging our communities to have a sense of belonging and pride in Progressive Jewish values;
- Recruiting, training and employing Jewish professionals;
- Providing programmes and publications;
- Educating and developing leaders;
- Supporting community building;
- Promoting support for and empathy with the State of Israel;
- Pursuing social justice and equal rights for all;
- Connecting and working with Progressive Jewish communities and organisations around the world.

Creation

We affirm the reality and centrality of God and that the Jewish people is bound to “the God of Abraham” by an eternal brit (covenant: ברית) as reflected in our understanding of Creation, Revelation and Redemption. Even though we may differ in our understandings of the Divine presence, we are all part of One Being, and a spark of it is part of each of us. Therefore every human life is sacred. We regard with reverence all of God’s creation and recognize our responsibility for its preservation and protection.

We encounter God’s presence in moments of awe and wonder, in acts of justice and compassion, in loving relationships and in the experiences of everyday life. In all these ways God, as the power beyond human understanding, gives meaning and purpose to our lives. “Who can understand the mysteries of Your acts? You gave us eyes to see Your signs... and a mouth to speak Your praises” [from The Crown of Sovereignty, Solomon ibn Gabriol].



‘When God began to create the heaven and the earth’

Genesis 1:1

Inclusiveness

The Progressive Jewish outlook on the world focuses primarily on people. We believe that every human being is created in the image of God (b'tzelem Elohim: **בצלם אלוהים**). This means that our distinctive qualities, talents and attitudes are in themselves expressions of the Divine act of creation. Consequently, each human being should be treated with respect and dignity, regardless of gender, colour, ethnicity, religion or sexual orientation. It also means that there should be total equality for men and women in all aspects of religious life.

Progressive Judaism acknowledges the autonomy of every Jew: each person's freedom to use their God-given intellectual and spiritual faculties in order to arrive at a personal understanding and appreciation of God's expectations. We are in constant dialogue with the world as well as with the sources of Jewish tradition. Progressive Jews learn the same Torah (**תורה**) and draw on the same traditions and customs as other Jews, with added awareness of and responsiveness to the world at large. We also recognise the knowledge that has emerged from non-Jewish sources.

By acknowledging religious diversity we draw together Jews who feel comfortable living their Judaism in diverse ways, and who see pluralism and egalitarianism as significant religious values. Progressive Judaism contains a powerful expectation that decisions about how to behave will include many factors, including some from within the Jewish tradition and from the wider world in which we live.

‘And God created humans, in the Eternal One’s image’

Genesis 1:27

Torah

“Torah” refers specifically to the Five Books of Moses (or Pentateuch) and generally to the entire collection of Judaism’s legal and ethical religious texts. A Sefer Torah (ספר תורה) or Torah scroll, is a copy of the Torah written on parchment with ink and quill, in a formal, traditional manner by a specially trained scribe under very strict requirements, and kept in the Aron Kodesh (ארון קודש).

Progressive Jews believe that the Torah is a unique book, and consequently we need special procedures for the experience of reading and understanding Torah. Torah remains at the heart of any Jewish experience of the world. Progressive Jews believe that Torah comes from God although we do not believe that it is a literal, exact dictation of words from God to Moses. Progressive Judaism believes that the Tanakh (תנ"ך) – Torah (Teaching: תורה), Nevi'im (Prophets: נביאים) and Ketuvim (Writings: כתובים) – contains words of eternal truth that offer guidance and definition for the creation and maintenance of a religion-based civilization.

Torah is the foundation of Jewish life. We cherish the truths revealed in Torah, God’s ongoing revelation to our people and the record of our people’s ongoing relationship with God. We believe that Torah is a manifestation of Ahavat Olam (God’s eternal love for the Jewish people and for all humanity: אהבת עולם) and we affirm the importance of studying Hebrew, the language of Torah and Jewish liturgy, in order that we may become closer to our sacred texts.

‘God spoke to Moses’
Leviticus 1:1

Derekh Eretz

Jewish tradition teaches us about the notion of Derekh Eretz (the way of the world: דֶּרֶךְ אֶרֶץ) Derekh Eretz is the code of proper behavior that binds us to each other as human beings and as Jews. According to tradition Derekh Eretz “precedes” the Torah (Leviticus Rabbah 9:3). We understand this to mean that while we recognize the importance of studying Torah and practicing mitzvot this only has relevance if we live and behave ethically and morally, especially toward other people.

Exhibiting common decency and appropriate behavior is crucial to the fulfillment of being a “good” Jewish person. This includes showing respect, behaving with decorum, caring about the welfare of others and extending hospitality to visitors.

In Pirke Avot, we learn from Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah: “If there is no Torah, there is no Derekh Eretz. And if there is no Derekh Eretz, there is no Torah.” Jewish tradition and Jewish practice are intertwined with Jewish behaviour. One does not come before the other, but instead each one complements the other. By aspiring to lives guided by Derekh Eretz, we can teach our children that there is always room for change and growth, and that love, appreciation and respect are very Jewish words.

‘If there is no Torah, there is no Derekh Eretz.
And if there is no Derekh Eretz, there is no Torah.’

Pirke Avot [The Ethics of our Ancestors] 3:21

Mitzvot

The 613 Mitzvot (commandments: מצוות תרי"ג) are statements and principles of law and ethics learned from the Five Books of Moses. They include positive instruction to do certain things as well as a number of acts which a person should refrain from doing. Some no longer apply since the destruction of the Second Temple (70 C.E), including those regarding the priests and animal sacrifices. As Progressive Jews we are committed to the ongoing study and practice of Mitzvot. Some of these Mitzvot, as sacred obligations, have long been observed by Progressive Jews; others, both ancient and modern, demand constant attention in order to place them into the unique context of the time.



Deuteronomy 33:4

‘Moses commanded us the Torah as an inheritance
for the community of Jacob’

Halachah

Halachah (הלכה) is the collective body of Jewish religious law including Biblical law (Mitzvot: מצוות) and later Talmudic and rabbinic law, as well as customs and traditions. Progressive Judaism acknowledges the importance of Jewish Law (Halacha) as a set of general principles for how to behave rather than as a set of detailed rules to follow in order to lead a good life. It is our view that other elements and strands of Torah, especially the narrative or life story, interact with the legal strands of Halacha and make them what they are.

Progressive Judaism believes that Jewish law does not remain static, nor does it always carry the same value for Jews in different ages. It is the responsibility of each generation to understand and apply the general principles of Jewish Law in order to lead a good and meaningful life. We believe that the Tanakh contains a set of rules and values that are inspired by God, written by people and interpreted by each generation.

We acknowledge that there are many pathways to God and we respect all faith-based individuals and groups who seek to create a better world. Each human being is responsible for the choices he or she makes. For a Jew, this responsibility entails an awareness and reflective consideration of the Jewish values and principles that emerge from Torah.

‘You will find God if you search with all your heart
and all your soul’

Deuteronomy 4:29

Prayer

Progressive Judaism encourages group prayer as well as valuing the place of personal and private prayer. Services include the Shema (שמע), Amidah (עמידה), Aleinu (עלינו), Kaddish (קדיש), and other standard prayers and Torah passages that are part of a Jewish prayer service. However the aesthetics of Progressive services allow for different forms of expression, including the use of the local language as well as Hebrew for prayer and an intrinsic commitment to decorum and orderliness.

Some Progressive services may include musical instruments and song as an accompaniment for prayer. The style of singing the prayers may differ from synagogue to synagogue, with some using a traditional chant, some drawing on modern Israeli melodies, and others blending elements from all these and other sources. As with most forms of religious expression, the choices made by the congregation are a combination of the cultural and geographic background of the members mixed with their desire to embrace more contemporary influences. The mixture of each of these influences often determines how “comfortable” a visitor is with the service. However “all are equal before God in prayer” [Exodus Rabbah 21:4].



Shabbat

The tradition of observing Shabbat (שבת) originates in the Torah and is the focal point for the opening of Genesis, the story of creation. It is also the only holy day included in the 10 Commandments. The founding concept is that God created the Heavens and the Earth in six days and then rested on the seventh day and sanctified that day. God then instructed the Children of Israel to do the same, thereby making them different from all other creatures. The gift of Shabbat, taking one day in seven to “be” and not “to do”, to celebrate creation, is essential to our way of life.

We greet the Shabbat as we would a bride and bid her farewell with prayers and song through Havdallah (separation). Shabbat calls us to bring the highest moral values to our daily labour and to culminate the work week with Kedushah (holiness), Menucha (celebration) and Oneg (rest). Observed from sundown Friday until the appearance of three stars in the sky on Saturday night Shabbat is a festive day, when a person is freed from the regular labours of everyday life, can contemplate the spiritual aspects of life, and can spend time with family and friends.



‘And the people of Israel shall observe the Shabbat’

Exodus 31:12

Festivals

Festivals are an important part of Jewish life and in the life of every Jew. They play a crucial role in keeping tradition alive, contributing a sense of community and belonging, and reminding us of important historical events – as well as providing the chance for reflection and celebration. The Festivals also allow us to celebrate and commemorate our people’s religious journey within the context of the changing seasons.

The most important Jewish holy days are the Sabbath, the two High Holy Days (Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur) and the three pilgrimage festivals (Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot). It is customary to not work on these days.

The High Holy Days call us to account for our deeds during the preceding year. “The Days of Awe” are 10 days which begin on Rosh Hashanah and run till the end of Yom Kippur, and are devoted to introspection, repentance, and atonement for sin. According to Jewish tradition, it is during the Days of Awe that God decides on each person’s fate in the next year. God writes these judgments in “books” on Rosh Hashanah, but they can be changed until the end of Yom Kippur, when the books are “sealed”.

The three “Pilgrimage Festivals” – Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot – are festivals on which Jews used to make pilgrimages to the Temple in Jerusalem with offerings for God from the harvest.

Pesach (Passover) is the holiday that commemorates the Exodus, the liberation of the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt in the time of Moses. Passover begins on the 15th day of the

‘These are My fixed times which you shall proclaim as sacred occasions

Leviticus 23:2



month of Nisan and ends on the 21st. It is a joyful time of family togetherness, where the story is handed from generation to generation during a special meal, known as the Seder (Order).

Shavuot, the festival of weeks occurring seven weeks after Pesach, celebrates the gift of Torah. It is commemorated by engaging in study of Torah and Jewish texts late into the night, in addition to the services and Torah readings of the festival.

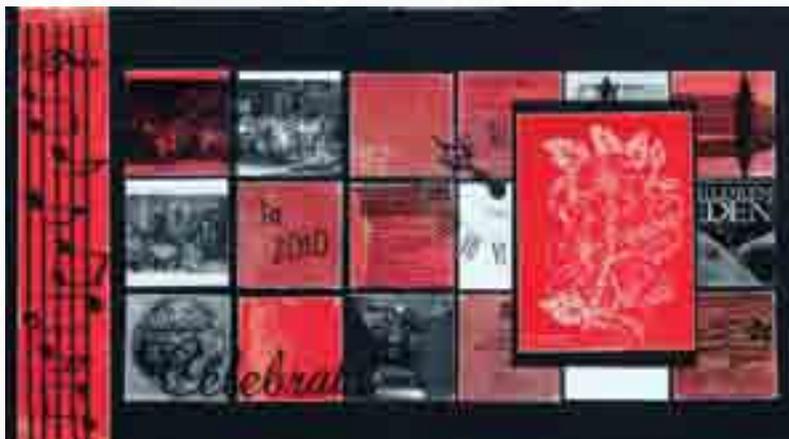
Sukkot is a harvest holiday that lasts for seven days. The festival begins on the 15th of Tishri and is a transition from the solemnity of Yom Kippur to the joy of a harvest festival. The primary observance associated with Sukkot is the building and dwelling in a temporary shelter, sukkah (סוכה) as a way of remembering the time our ancestors spent wandering in the wilderness.

There are other more minor festivals such as Chanukah, Tu B'shvat and Purim, each with special historical and religious significance and specific traditions. For more information about them visit www.upj.org.au.

Kashrut

The general question of ethical eating is an important one for Progressive Judaism and, as with other issues, the main focus is on the key principles. Alongside the traditional concerns expressed in the rules of Kashrut (כשרות), such as only eating certain animals, separating milk and meat, and the like), there are new concerns with ecological and environmental issues surrounding the production and consumption of food.

For many Progressive Jews the rules of Kashrut include refusing to eat battery-laid eggs, avoiding food products from companies that engage in unethical business practices, not using catering firms that use non-recyclable disposable plates or cutlery, mistreating the staff or refusing to distribute unconsumed sealed foodstuffs to the needy. Sometimes expressed as eco-Kashrut, we combine the traditional rules with insights from ecology and related disciplines to create a system of Kashrut that reflects our broader concerns for social justice.



‘These are the beasts which you may eat’

Leviticus 11:2

Social justice

Concern about social justice and social action, the demand to repair or ‘perfect’ the world, is a very important part of Progressive Judaism. The rabbis teach us that the Torah says 36 times: “You shall treat the stranger with respect, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” Progressive Judaism believes that Jewish observance without social responsibility is religiously empty. The focus on social justice within Progressive Jewish circles relates to respect for people’s autonomy and their ability to arrive at the balance between ritual concerns and social justice that best expresses their religious impulses. As we were commanded: ‘Tzedek, tzedek, tirdof’ (Justice, Justice shall you pursue: צדק תרדוף) in Deuteronomy 16:20.

We bring Torah into the world when we strive to fulfil the highest ethical mandates in our relationships with others and with all of God’s creation. Partners with God in Tikkun Olam (repairing the world: תיקון עולם), we are called to help bring nearer the messianic age. We seek dialogue and joint action with people of other faiths in the hope that together we can bring peace, freedom and justice to our world. We are obligated to pursue Tzedek (צדק), and to narrow the gap between the affluent and the poor, to act against discrimination and oppression, to pursue peace, to welcome the newcomer, to protect the earth’s biodiversity and natural resources, and to redeem those in physical, economic and spiritual bondage. In so doing, we reaffirm social action and social justice as a central prophetic focus of traditional Progressive Jewish belief and practice. We affirm the Mitzvah of Tzedakah, setting aside portions of our earnings and our time to provide for those in need. These acts bring us closer to fulfilling the prophetic call to translate the words of Torah into the works of our hands.

‘Perfecting the world’ under the Sovereignty of God’

Aleinu Prayer; Siddur

Rabbi

The role of the Rabbi (רבי) is as a spiritual and communal leader. Progressive Jews are “rabbinic Jews” in that as most other groups of Jews today, we define our religious life in the terms laid down by our rabbinic forebears many centuries ago, and we continue to ordain men and women as rabbis in order to transmit and amplify these teachings.

Over the centuries there have been many ways to interpret the program laid down by those rabbinic forebears. In the Progressive community the rabbi remains a teacher but also a resource person, a source of entry into Torah and Jewish learning, as well as representing the congregation to the wider community. He or she is a spiritual counsellor and an inspiration and guide for the community as a whole as well as its individual members.



Patrilineal descent

As well as welcoming children of two Jewish parents, Progressive Judaism accepts that, under appropriate and clearly defined circumstances, the child of one Jewish parent and one non-Jewish parent is also Jewish.

We hold that the reasons that led the rabbis of the Talmud to determine Jewish status through the mother alone are no longer valid and the nature of identity includes acknowledging that the children of Jewish fathers can also have a Jewish identity. We believe that parentage (or genetics) alone is not sufficient for a child to form a Jewish identity. For this acceptance to occur, the non-Jewish parent must agree to the child having an exclusively Jewish upbringing. The home must be actively Jewish, the parents must live with Jewish values, and the child must receive a Jewish education. Then, as the child approaches the age of bar/bat-mitzvah, he or she is recognized in his or her own right as a member of the Jewish community, either through a formal conversion procedure or through the act of reading from Torah as bar/bat-mitzvah.

Progressive Judaism reconsidered Jewish status and followed this route because we are compelled to do so by an inexorable logic that comes from our sense of the divine.

‘It was to your ancestors that God was drawn in love,
choosing their descendants from among all peoples’

Deuteronomy 10:15

‘The stranger that sojourns with you shall be to you as the home-born among you, and you shall love them as yourself’

Leviticus 19:34

Conversion

People who seek to convert to Judaism through the Progressive movement must go through a process of extensive learning, integration into the community, personal reflection and growth. To complete the process, which takes on average 18-24 months, the person must be accepted by a Beit Din (a rabbinical court: בית דין). Non-Jews may be attracted to explore Judaism for many reasons, including the fact that their partner is Jewish or they may have developed an affinity for Judaism through a study of Jewish history or the Bible.

Whatever their original motivation, by the end of the process those who choose Judaism must be personally committed to Judaism as a way of life, and to the Jewish people. The process includes: participating in Jewish rituals and worship; attending a year-long practical course in the basics of Judaism; experiencing the festivals and Holy Days of the Jewish year; reflecting in writing on the patterns and values of one's new Jewish life and identifying influential people and events.

The final stage involves appearing before a Beit Din and completing the ritual requirements of milah (ritual circumcision: מילה) for a man and tevilah (immersion in a ritual bath: טבילה), for men and women.

Life-cycle events

The traditions and values of Judaism embrace each person's entire life from the time they enter the world as a Jewish person and long after their death, as their memory is regularly remembered and invoked by their family, friends and community. Progressive Judaism has an egalitarian approach to all these life-cycle events. The Jewish life-cycle commences at the time of birth, adoption or conversion, and is accompanied by special prayers and rituals to mark entry into the covenant. These include circumcision and naming for a male and a naming ceremony for a female. In Progressive Judaism, boys and girls celebrate becoming Bar or Bat Mitzvah by reading from the Torah and leading the community in prayer, marking the time when they are counted as full members of the congregation and the family of Israel.

Marriage has tremendous significance in Judaism, as it signifies the coming together of two individuals to create a Jewish family, with the potential to create future generations. Progressive Judaism values the importance of sanctifying relationships of same-sex couples, and Progressive rabbis also officiate at commitment ceremonies.

In Genesis 3:19, we read: "For you are dust and to dust shall you return." Death is not a curse but a natural component of human nature. Since each person comes from the earth, it is only natural that they return to earth. In essence, death is a part of the life-cycle. The mourning of a loved one is commemorated by special prayers and rituals performed by the relatives with the support of the community. The death of community members is commemorated by the congregation each anniversary and through special prayers on Holy Days.

“To everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven.

Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) 3:1

Israel

We are committed to Medinat Yisrael (the State of Israel: מדינת ישראל), and rejoice in its accomplishments. We affirm the unique qualities of living in Eretz Yisrael (the land of Israel: ארץ ישראל), and encourage aliyah (immigration to Israel: עליה). We are committed to a vision of the State of Israel that promotes full civil, human and religious rights for all its inhabitants and that strives for a lasting peace between Israel and its neighbours. We are committed to promoting and strengthening Progressive Judaism in Israel, which will enrich the spiritual life of the Jewish state and its people. We affirm that both Israeli and Diaspora Jewry are vibrant and interdependent communities.

We believe in Am Yisrael (the nation of Israel) as a people aspiring to holiness, singled out through our ancient covenant and our unique history among the nations to be witnesses to God's presence. We are linked by that covenant and that history to all Jews in every age and place. We are committed to the mitzvah (מצוה) of ahavat Yisrael (love for the Jewish people: אהבת ישראל), and to k'lal Yisrael (the entirety of the community of Israel: כלל ישראל).

Recognizing that kol Yisrael arevim zeh ba-zeh (all Jews are responsible for one another: כל ישראל ערבים זה בזה), we reach out to all Jews across ideological and geographical boundaries. We embrace religious and cultural pluralism as an expression of the vitality of Jewish communal life in Israel and in the Diaspora.

Kehillah

The concept of group and Kehillah (community: קהילה) is a vital component of Jewish life. Life cycle events – from circumcision to funeral – are intended to be shared with family and friends. “It is not good for a person to be alone” [Genesis 2:18]. Being part of a group that prays, celebrates and mourns together provides the means to care for others and to seek support in times of need. Ten people are required for a full prayer service. The concept of community also includes the importance of volunteering, donating and generally working with and as part of a community.

“All Jews are responsible for one another” [Sifra 112a to Leviticus 26-34], and we apply similar principles to our dealings with the broader community in which we live.”

Progressive Jews respect Minhag hamakom (local custom: מנהג המקום). This means that a particular congregation’s rituals and practices will often reflect and respect the broader culture in which the community lives as well as including the traditions and values of Judaism.



‘Do not separate yourself from the community’

Pirkei Avot 2:5



artworks

- Cover ***Seven Species***
by Alison Shearman (North Shore Temple Emanuel)
- 2 ***12 Tribes Star***
by Alison Shearman (North Shore Temple Emanuel)
- 4 ***Kiddush***
by Jamie Shear (United Jewish Congregation of Hong Kong)
- 6 ***Education***
by Alison Shearman (North Shore Temple Emanuel)
- 8 ***Day One of Creation*** (Stained glass window)
by David Wright (Temple Beth Israel)
- 12 ***Curiosity, Passing the Quill***
by Ellen M Friedlander
(United Jewish Congregation of Hong Kong)
- 14 ***Tree of Life Tallit***
by Lorraine Larri (Emanuel Synagogue)
- 15 ***Jewish Observance: Shabbat***
by Alison Shearman (North Shore Temple Emanuel)
- 17 ***Ark Curtain***
by Alison Shearman (North Shore Temple Emanuel)
- 18 ***Celebrate***
by Toni Whitmont (North Shore Temple Emanuel)
- 20 ***Lovingkindness***
by Jamie Shear (United Jewish Congregation of Hong Kong)
- 25 ***Torah Curtain***
by Gail Haffern (Beth Shalom, Auckland, New Zealand)

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