

Chochmat Lev



Maharat Torah

IN HONOR OF

*Ann and Jeremy Pava
and
Maharat's 14th Semikha
Ceremony*

Dedicated to Ann and Jeremy Pava

Harold Grinspoon and Diane Troderman

Chani and Steve Laufer
and the Aviv Foundation



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Jewish female leadership***

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The Torah tells us that intelligence is not simply chachmah, wisdom. It is chochmat lev, wisdom of the heart. This strange formulation prompted the Yalkut Shimoni (Prov., par. 929) to ask: where is wisdom to be found? Rabbi Eliezer says in the head. Rabbi Joshua says in the heart.

Rabbi Eliezer makes intuitive sense. Our wisdom comes from study, analysis, and rigorous thought. And yet, the midrash rules like Rabbi Joshua: wisdom is in the heart.

In many ways, this surprising conclusion is the animating vision of Yeshivat Maharat. Our students are ordained with the ability to lead, to pasken, and to teach. They emerge from our program as rigorous halakhic thinkers and skilled communal leaders, like Rabbi Eliezer's heirs. But the most effective spiritual leaders are those who have also confronted the full range of the human condition, who have reckoned with grief, complexity, doubt, and joy, and who bring that lens to the Torah they write and teach. Yeshivat Maharat cultivates Torah of the head and the heart, and the two should not be separated.

The pages that follow are a testament to that vision. For 17 years, Yeshivat Maharat has worked to amplify women's Torah leadership in the Orthodox community. This volume gathers the voices of the class of 2026, alumnae, and faculty into a single, lasting record, adding to our Jewish canon. Organized by parshiot and chaggim, it offers a companion for every Shabbat table and every season.

This book is released in honor of our graduating class of 2026, seven extraordinary women, and in recognition of Ann and Jeremy Pava, whose generosity and commitment to Maharat and women's Orthodox leadership have profoundly amplified our mission.

I am deeply grateful to students, alumnae, and faculty for sharing their wisdom and their hearts with the Jewish community. You are the living proof that chochmat lev is flourishing.

B'vracha,

Rabba Sara Hurwitz

President and Co-Founder



As the shiva came to a close, Rabbanit Judith Levitan '20 rose to speak before thousands gathered at Bondi Beach in Sydney. The beach itself is a kind of miniature Eden, resting along the Pacific, framed by gentle hills. Just a week earlier, its beauty had been shattered, as 14 Jews were murdered for one reason alone: they were Jews.

There stood Rabbanit Judith, addressing a crowd largely unfamiliar with Jewish mourning. And yet, she brought the shiva to life, gently and powerfully creating a moment in which the crowd felt as though they themselves were offering comfort to the Jewish people.

She spoke of the transition at the end of shiva: even as we mourn, life continues. And our task, as Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik taught, is to transform fate into destiny.

That moment at Bondi Beach felt like a reflection of the Torah of Yeshivat Maharat, a Torah of depth and rigor, rooted in tradition, and alive with the language of the soul. This is a learning that not only teaches but reaches and inspires.

How blessed I have been to witness how Rabba Sara Hurwitz and Rabbi Jeffrey Fox have brought that vision to life. The true diamonds of Maharat are its graduates, women who now serve as rabbis across the world.

Listening to Rabbanit Judith, I felt I was hearing not just one voice but a chorus of voices that have become my teachers, my rabbis. This volume is a powerful expression of those voices. It gathers together years of learning, teaching, and leadership into a single work, marking a significant and momentous milestone for Maharat and for the broader Orthodox community. It is fitting that this publication also recognizes Ann and Jeremy Pava, whose generosity and deep commitment to Maharat and to women's Orthodox leadership have helped make this work possible.

My blessing is that Maharat students and rabbis, together with their supporters and faculty, continue to rise, bringing comfort, deepening Torah, and strengthening Am Yisrael.

Avi Weiss

Rabbi Avi Weiss

Co-Founder



Maharat's annual Semikha celebration is one of my and many others' favorite nights of the year. Those who have had the great honor of being in the audience are deeply moved and inspired by the unique and meaningful messages shared by each of our graduates. Over the course of our 14 graduations, we have heard time and again how the education our students receive at Maharat has shaped them as individuals, inspired them to share their knowledge and love of Judaism with others, and ultimately made Judaism more meaningful for Jews around the world.

It is with great pride that we share this volume of *Chochmat Lev: Maharat Torah*, which once again offers us the opportunity to learn from a wide range of our students and graduates. Their unique ideas and perspectives can enrich our lives on a weekly basis as we prepare for each week's Torah portion and celebrate the chaggim.

This volume reflects our commitment to cultivating high-level pastoral, spiritual, and Torah leaders who meet individuals where they are: in established synagogues, emerging communities, college campuses, day schools, communal organizations, and hospitals. We have been especially focused on strengthening our students' and alumnae's ability to share their Torah through the written word. This year, we launched our Rabbinic Writing Seminar to help students develop and elevate their voices in writing. In addition, Va'tichtov: She Writes, our fellowship dedicated to advancing women's writing, is now in its fifth year and continues to support our graduates in publishing teshuvot, essays, books, and op-eds.

On behalf of the entire Board of Directors, we are proud to dedicate this volume to Ann and Jeremy Pava, whose wisdom, guidance, and support have enabled Maharat to flourish into the institution it is today. Ann, those of us who had the privilege of serving alongside you on the Maharat Board for seven years benefited greatly from your philanthropic expertise, optimistic outlook, and deep understanding of the field.

To our 2026 graduates: may this volume serve as an inspiration for your continued study of Torah and your commitment to sharing it with others.

Ariel Groveman Weiner

Board Chair

About Maharat

MISSION

To educate, ordain, and invest in passionate and committed Orthodox women who model a dynamic Judaism to inspire and support individuals and communities

VISION

A world in which Judaism is relevant, Jewish communities are educated, and diverse leaders guide individuals to live spiritually engaged lives

Maharat was founded on the belief that Orthodox female leaders are critical for the future of the Jewish community. Ordination and the authority of a title are necessary for women to make a profound impact. We focus on learning and scholarship for a purpose: excellence in Torah, halakha, and tradition, overlaid with pastoral and leadership training.

We train rabbis who are compassionate leaders, listeners, scholars, and educators. Learning, teaching, upholding, and doing informs our foundational and fundamental vision. We are a force and leader in the global Jewish community, ordaining rabbis who transcend boundaries, build denominational, communal, and interfaith bridges, and have ignited a revolution in visionary, learned, and relatable Judaism.

For over a decade, Maharat has published a weekly parsha email sharing visionary, learned, and relatable divrei Torah written by students, alumnae, and faculty with Jews across the globe. For the first time, we are producing a compendium of this wisdom, which is also available online at **yeshivatmaharat.org**.

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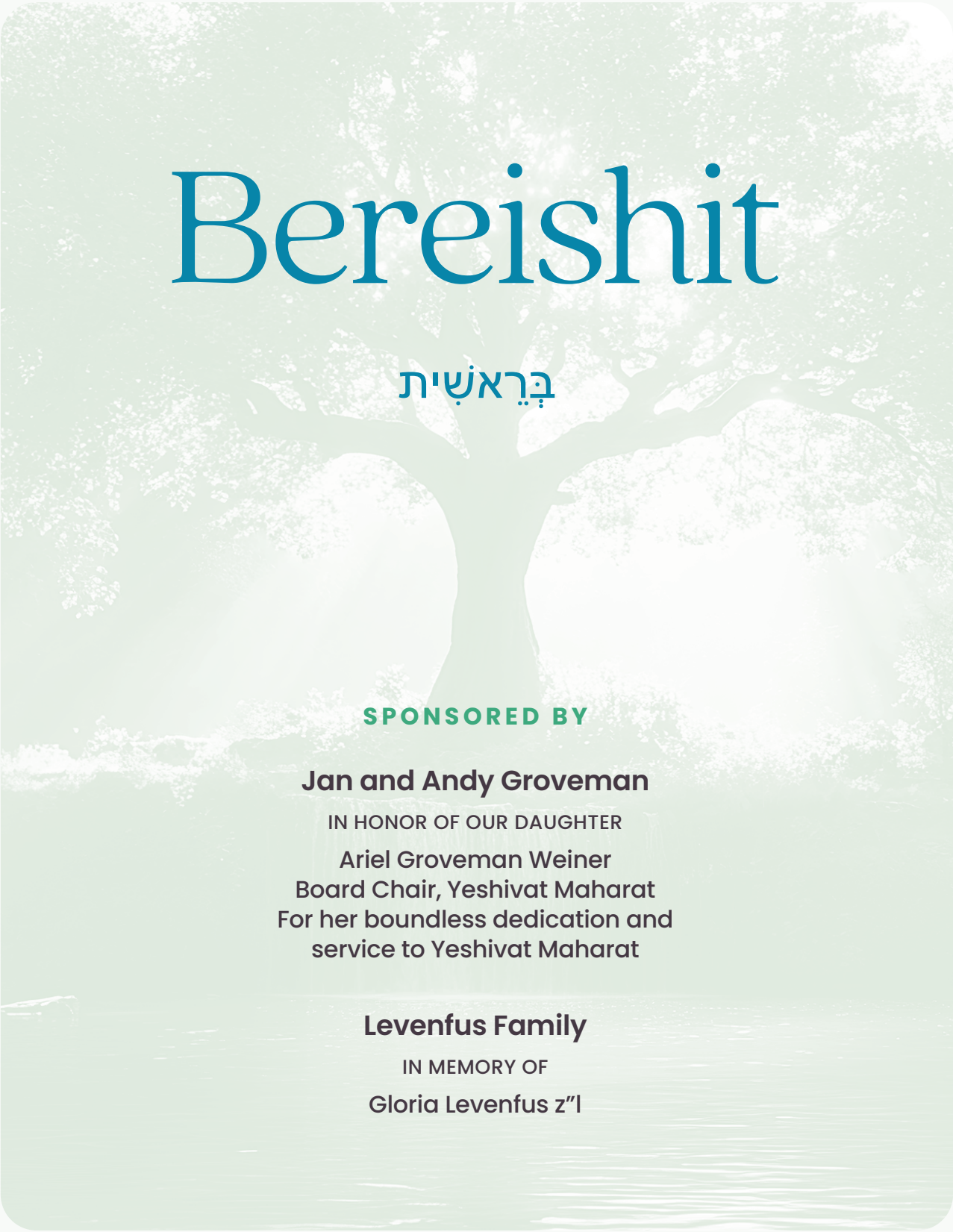
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בְּרֵאשִׁית

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IN HONOR OF OUR DAUGHTER

Ariel Groveman Weiner

Board Chair, Yeshivat Maharat

For her boundless dedication and
service to Yeshivat Maharat

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Gloria Levenfus z"l

The Sacred Narrow Gap



Shoshana Jakobovits

Class of '26

If you mention the name “Piccard” in casual conversation in Switzerland, everyone will know the great family of explorers you are referring to. Auguste Piccard, a balloonist, was the first to fly to the stratosphere in 1931. His son, Jacques Piccard, explored the depths and was the first to descend to the bottom of the Mariana Trench, in 1960. Jacques’ son, Bertrand Piccard, pursued his grandfather’s legacy by completing the first non-stop balloon flight around the globe, followed by the first round-the-world solar-powered flight.

A longform article about Bertrand Piccard, published in *The New Yorker* (“Close to the Sun: The Making of Bertrand Piccard’s Solar-Powered Air Journey Around the World” by Ben Taub, October 3, 2022) describes his travels and his work in pioneering clean technologies. It ends with the following quote:

Each dawn of his twenty days in the sky during the circumnavigation was seared into his memory. “You have everything black, and then suddenly you have a little white line in the middle,” he said. “And then this line becomes wider and wider, until the sky becomes silver. Suddenly, the sun arrives, and makes everything red. And then you have a flash, and color lands on the Earth. For me, it was every morning as if I was at the moment of the creation of the world.”

I am struck by this quote, not just for its poetics—for the arresting beauty of a sunrise witnessed from an aircraft—but for the way Bertrand Piccard describes himself beholding creation. He sees it not

as an act that happened once, in the beginning, a long long time ago but rather living “every morning as if I was at the moment of the creation of the world.”

Yes, our Torah opens with the words “Bereishit bara” in past tense. This grammatical nuance makes it sound like we are about to hear a story of creation that once took place. But our tefillah offers another way of looking at ma’aseh bereshit: in birkat yotzer, we describe God as “hamechadesh betuvo bechol yom ma’aseh bereishit”—we praise God not for just having created the world once but for renewing the act of creation daily.

What if we could read Bereishit not as the story of what once was but as a story unfolding every morning under our eyes? How can we make a story about dividing light from darkness (day 1) and about separating the waters above from the waters below (day 2) a story we can witness in this very moment?

The gemara in Chagiga 15a records the following curious encounter between Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananya and Ben Zoma:

The Sages taught: There was once an incident with regard to Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananya, who was standing on a step on the Temple Mount, and ben Zoma saw him and did not stand before him to honor him, as he was deep in thought. Rabbi Yehoshua said to him: From where do you come and where are you going, ben Zoma, i.e., what is on your mind? He said to him: In my thoughts I was looking upon the act of Creation, at the gap between the upper waters and the lower waters, as there is only the breadth of a mere three fingers between them [...] (Chagiga 15a).

The gemara is not quite satisfied with characterizing the gap between the upper waters and the lower waters as “only the breadth of a mere three fingers” and continues to debate how this width should be described:

And how much, in fact, is the gap between them? Rav Aḥa bar Ya’akov said: Like the thickness of a thread; and the Rabbis said: Like the gap between the boards of a bridge. Mar Zutra, and some say it was Rav Asi, said: Like two robes spread one over the other, with a slight gap in between. And some said: Like two cups placed one upon the other (Chagiga 15a).

I do not know what difference it might make whether the gap is more like the gap between boards of a bridge or like the gap between two robes spread one over the other. But one thing is clear from this discussion: all sages are in agreement that the gap is vanishingly small. And so, according to this tradition/understanding, on the second day of creation, God opens a narrow gap within the watery mess of the world, a narrow sacred gap between the upper waters and the lower waters. And we, along with all the living beings and everything that will be created in the next four days, inhabit this sacred narrow gap.

Instead of describing the space of habitable human life as a vast expansion, one that would take humanity (and with it, family Piccard) many years and relentless work to descend and ascend, the gemara describes this gap as basically nothing: a thin little crust, a tiny sacred space in which life is possible.

The New Yorker article about Bertrand Piccard explains:

All human settlements fall within a tiny band of the lower atmosphere, from the Dead Sea region to La Rinconada, a Peruvian gold-mining village in the high Andes, three miles up. At that altitude, half of the

atmospheric pressure is gone, and, if you go a little higher, the air becomes so thin that your lungs struggle to inflate. Beyond five miles, there isn’t enough oxygen for humans to survive. Hypoxia sets in. Twelve miles up, where there is barely any atmospheric pressure, your blood would start to boil. No one knows exactly where to define the limits of the atmosphere; by one measure, it extends nearly to the moon. But the range of what for us is habitable is astonishingly small—a mere film around the planet, making possible the formation of complex life.

Most of us have not spent days piloting balloons and aircrafts around the world, but many of us have witnessed an arrestingly beautiful sunrise. Can Parshat Bereishit and birkat yotzer give us the impulse to look at creation as a story unfolding and renewed every day? Can we live with the consciousness of the tiny habitable gap in which our human lives exist between the waters above and waters below? Can we acknowledge that, in the face of the immensity of the universe, our lives merely hang in a tender narrow sacred gap, “like the thickness of a thread?”

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Noach

Emerging from the Ark



Rabbanit Yael Keller

Class of '22

Take a moment and think of one word that describes Noach. Noach is a complicated figure—a man of faith, a leader, a builder, a family man, timid, quiet, a survivor.

Scholars throughout our tradition have struggled to figure out Noach. Although the Torah tells us Noach is an ish tzadik (a righteous person), many see the following word, b'dorotav (in his generation), as a qualifier. Noach wouldn't have been righteous in another generation, compared to Avraham, for example. Rashi explains that Noach walked with God, as the pasuk 6:9 states, but Avraham walked **before** God. Noach needed help, but Avraham drew strength from within. And this difference is seen as a bad thing. I wonder, though, is it so bad? What does it mean to walk with God instead of in front of God?

A midrash in the Midrash Tanchuma, one of the oldest collections of extant midrashim, asks why the Torah states that God told Noach it was time to leave the teivah. The midrash envisions Noach sitting in the ark thinking, "God told me when to go into the ark, so I should probably wait for permission to leave as well." Rabbi Yehudah Bar Ilai says, "If I had been there, I would have smashed down the doors of the ark and taken myself out."

That is such a powerful statement. I can imagine Rabbi Yehudah Bar Ilai's frustration. Picture him shaking Noach and saying, "get out there, man!" In fact, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks says, in response to this midrash, "when it comes to rebuilding a shattered

world, you do not wait for permission. God gives us permission. He expects us to go on ahead" ("The Courage to Live with Uncertainty," *Covenant and Conversation*). While Avraham walked in front of God, Noach walked with God because Noach needed help.

Now I have certainly been considered a door smasher from time to time. And I don't have to imagine feeling impatient. And yet, recent years have given me perspective about what it means to live in a scary, uncertain world, about what it means to feel stuck in the ark. And I have begun to feel that Noach is getting the short end of the stick.

The 16th-century Shenei Luchot HaBerit by Rabbi Isaiah Halevi Horovitz explains that Noach personifies the personality of a Shoneh, one who changes. He witnessed a world that functioned; he then witnessed a world that was destroyed; finally he witnessed a world rebuilt. He lived in a time of cataclysmic change. This is no small thing. At a time when things are constantly changing, perhaps Noach's strongest quality is his faith. Of course Noach needed God to walk alongside him! The grounds were constantly shifting underneath his feet.

Although Noach saw the waters recede and he conducted his tests, sending out the birds to explore, it seems he needed to continue to put his faith directly in God and wait for God's explicit direction. Instead of seeing this as timidity, though, we can view it as an act of patience and great faith. When is it time to open our metaphoric ark doors? Will we bang them down, charging ahead to rebuild a shattered world? Or will we want to wait, to have patience, to listen to God's counsel?

There are lots of ways to survive trauma, and I certainly don't mean to say one is better than another. But I want to encourage us to give ourselves some of the credit I believe Noach also deserves. Living through traumatic times may make us slower to react, more hesitant, more reliant on our faith than science. And that is okay. We can

learn from Noach to remain deeply rooted in faith through disaster. We can rebuild our shattered world only once we have rebuilt ourselves.

Noach leaves the ark a changed man. We all emerge from our trials changed, and our traumas do not recede as quickly as the floods do. In fact, I can imagine another ending for the midrash. Perhaps Rabbi Yehudah Bar Ilai would have said, "If I had been there, I would have channeled my faith and my patience. If I had been there, I would have walked out of the ark, with God by my side, not behind me."

“

**We can rebuild our
shattered world only once
we have rebuilt ourselves.**

Rabbanit Yael Keller

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Rabbanit Yael Keller

Not All Those Who Wander Are Lost



**Rabbanit Dr. Myriam
Ackermann Sommer**

Class of '23

“**L**ech lecha”: what a startling injunction to initiate the dialogue between Hashem and Avram! Indeed, this week’s parsha begins in medias res with Hashem’s command to the first Patriarch.

Hashem said to Avram, “Go forth from your land, from where you were born and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you.”

This harsh command is usually understood as one of Avram’s trials in his quest for Hashem. Yet, while some struggle with the content of the imperative itself, which seems to assert the necessity of leaving everything behind so as to meet the terms of the alliance, I have always struggled with the “lecha” (literally “for you”) rather than with the “lech” (“go”). “Lecha”, as many commentators have noted, is somewhat grammatically redundant, as the imperative “lech” already mentions the second person: it is obvious that the intended addressee is Avram. “Lecha” thus lends itself to be interpreted as a meaningful allusion in its own right. Rashi (along with Radak, among others) famously read “lecha” as follows.

(Go for yourself)—**for your own benefit, for your own good**: there I will make of you a great nation while here you will not have the privilege of having children (Rosh Hashana 16b). Furthermore, I shall make known your nature throughout the world (Midrash Tanchuma, Lech Lecha 3).

This pshat, however inspiring and reassuring, once sounded somewhat puzzling to me and perhaps even slightly disappointing. I used to think that it

toned down Avram’s ordeal and the uprootedness that would result from it. In my mind, it was linked with other popular translations of “lech lecha” as an imperative to “find oneself” or “go (back) to oneself,” a model for personal growth urging us on a quest for our hidden, innermost selves. However, I wondered, is this really what the parsha is about? Do we find ourselves by leaving behind everything that made us what we are? If Hashem’s command was merely another “know thyself” decree, akin to the maxim of the Temple at Delphi, why not look inward, to one’s land and one’s home, to find oneself, rather than outward? I disagreed with this feel-good reading of the injunction addressed to Avram, whereby we need only “go to ourselves” to find meaning in our lives. Rather, it is by turning to Hashem that Avram finds himself. It is the quintessential Other, the people that we meet on the way, that make us who we are. We exist only *in relation*, through the displacement and instability that relationships imply and make us experience.

Thus, this week’s parsha vividly expresses the disruption of identity as a process of submitting to change and, to use an even more significant word, alteration (through the encounter with the *alter*, the Other, Hashem). This breach in the continuity of selfhood is epitomized by the addition of the “n” to the names of Sarai/Sarah and Avram/Avraham (Bereishit 17:5 and 17:15), which enacts this inscription of the Other at the heart of the self. One can never be the same after encountering Hashem, the commanding voice that displaces the self out of the safety of its home, that orders it out of its secure dwelling place. According to Jewish French thinker Emmanuel Levinas, whose works focus on the philosophical foundations of ethics, this impossibility to return to where we used to be, both geographically and existentially, defines the specificity of Avraham’s journey. To highlight the uniqueness of the journey that Avraham Avinu undertakes, Levinas writes in “The Trace of the

Other" (1963): "To the myth of Ulysses' return to Ithaca I would like to oppose the story of Avraham, who leaves his homeland for a land yet unknown and forbids his servant to ever bring his own son back from whence he came." Identity, in this regard, is not circular: to quote Whitman's phrase, it "launches men and women forward into the unknown."

In the light of this suggestion, let us go back to Hashem's first word to Avram: "lech." This word requires a movement beyond everything that made the individual what he or she was: one's land, one's place of birth, one's family (what was *famil-iar*); beyond one's geographical and spiritual situation, understood literally, as a situatedness in terms of identity. "Lech Lecha" means leaving behind the stability and situatedness of everyday life to embark on a journey whose outcome rests on Hashem's promise ("... to the land which I will show you"). There is no alliance or trust without running the risk of losing everything. Identity, in this new reading of the introductory injunction, is all about wandering into the unknown, led by a mere promise—not "to find yourself" again but rather "for your own benefit." And this is how I now read Rashi's illuminating comment: even though you feel that you are leaving a lot behind, you will find more in this journey that you could ever expect to find here in your homeland, where you feel comfortable. Avraham and Sarah's identities are always in the making, progressive, nomadic. This is emphasized by the Sforno's reading of the end of the pasuk.

To the land that I will show you: to the place in the land that I will show you in a Godly vision. This is why [Avram] kept moving further into the land without pitching his tent to settle down until he reached the place that Hashem indicated (...)

Avraham and Sarah seem to be defined by this vision of identity in progress, whereby uprootedness also means openness not only to the voice of the Other, Hashem, but to that of others in general, the people whom they met on their way out of Haran, these "souls which they made," who are traditionally

understood to refer to the converts (Bereishit Rabba 39:14). Rashi adds, "I shall make known your nature, your character in the world." In other words, you will become a beacon for others as you go out of your way (literally) to greet them and welcome them into your life.

Finally, Avraham and Sarah are known for their characters, but also, almost metonymically, for their dwellings. The tent, the "ohel," seems to encapsulate this tension between stability and motion, between inwardness and outwardness, and between privacy and openness, through which identity as process can unravel through time and through meaningful encounters with the outside world. Hence Avraham is positioned in the beginning of the first pasuk of the following parsha in a liminal place from where the other can be welcomed: "and he was standing at the entrance of the tent" (Bereishit 18:1). It is often said that Avraham was exceptionally hospitable, but even that is an understatement. Avraham Avinu, Rashi teaches us, was actually sitting at the tent door purposefully, seeking people passing by the ohel to invite them in. May we learn from the middot of our patriarchs and matriarchs as we open our own tents and prepare to start the mysterious journey that awaits.

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Rachel (and Matthew) Berke

IN HONOR OF

the Class of 2026. It has been my
privilege to learn with you and from you.
May you go from strength to strength.

Actualizing Loyalty



Rabbi Marianne Novak

Class of '19

How would you show your loyalty and commitment to God and Judaism? Would you start praying? Would you start learning Torah? Are there other mitzvot that you would perform with greater care and seriousness? And if so, which ones and why?

When our parsha opens, we find 100-year-old Avraham living in Elonei Mamre. He has received repeated promises from God and made a covenant with Him. Avraham had recently followed God's command to circumcise himself and all the males of his household. God then appears to him as he recovers from his self-circumcision. The Chachamim derive the mitzvah of visiting the sick, bikkur cholim, from God's action here. But Avraham doesn't behave as someone who had just undergone major surgery. When God arrives, Avraham, instead of recuperating in his sick bed, is found at the opening of his tent during the hottest part of the day in a desert climate. And what is Avraham doing there? He's looking for guests! When strangers arrive, he runs to greet them and then says:

He said, "My **lords**, if it please you, do not go on past your servant.

The English translation here (JPS) of the word "adonai" is in the plural, "my lords," implying that Avraham used a respectful honorific to the strangers. Rashi, however, bringing the tradition from Bereishit Rabah, provides a different reading.

Another explanation is that the word is "holy" (referring to God): [Avraham] asked God to wait for him until he ran and invited in the guests.

Why was Avraham asking God to wait? Let's set the scene again. God personally appears to Avraham to comfort him after his brit milah. And Avraham, instead of staying to receive God, tells God to wait and runs out of his tent to busily attend to strangers. To put this scene into modern terms, it would be as if God was visiting me in the intensive care unit and I told Him to hold on a minute as I must run out of my hospital bed to make sure some strangers that I saw wandering in the halls had food to eat.

The situation with Avraham, therefore, is somewhat odd. Hakadosh Baruch Hu is in his presence, yet Avraham attends to people he has never met. Given the interactions God has had with human beings up until this point—interactions that have in one way or another have gone quite poorly—one may wonder how God views Avraham's behavior. God's close interaction with Adam and Chava didn't end well. And while God's involvement with Noach begins auspiciously and results in a covenant for the world, it ends on a sour note with Noach's drunken behavior and conflict with his sons. And in Avraham's case, the question is even more pointed since God has made a covenant with him and his offspring for eternity. While Avraham has shown loyalty to God by obeying the direct commandment of brit milah, here Avraham's actions are less clear. Avraham asks God to watch him as he literally runs around getting provisions for these strangers, and the narrative employs verbs to show Avraham's care and urgency—

Vayaratz: he ran to greet them

Va y'maher: he hastened to the tent

So what is God seeing here? Perhaps Avraham is showing that he understands God's purpose for him on earth, a purpose that goes beyond building altars to show thanks and even beyond telling people about the one God. Perhaps, when Avraham

bends over backwards to serve these travellers, God sees that Avraham truly embodies the command for him to be blameless. When Avraham shows kindness to people he doesn't know at a moment when it makes no rational sense to do so, he shows his greatest loyalty to God. Avraham understands that although the norm at the time was quite the opposite (as we see in the characterization of Sodom and Amorrhah) to be God-like is to treat human beings with respect and kindness. God looks at Avraham here and is reassured that, in choosing Avraham, He has chosen the right person: someone who, within partnership, within brit, will fulfill God's mission to infuse the world with His truth, justice, and kindness. God immediately rewards him by having these very strangers be His messengers and announce to Avraham again that Sarah will bear him a son.

So let's return to our initial questions. How would you show loyalty to God? Perhaps you would show your thanks, gratitude, and ultimate belief in God by praying or, as Avraham did, building altars. You might learn Torah and then teach it to others as Avraham did by publicizing the idea that God is one. You might also be more careful with certain mitzvot, such as kashrut or Shabbat. Avraham's example here, however, offers another path. He shows us that one of the greatest ways to show one's loyalty to God is by serving other people, especially when it makes no real sense to do so.

Avraham's behavior is a reminder to us that when we fulfill those mitzvot of bikkur cholim, visiting the sick; hachnassat orchim, taking care of guests; or any other of the mitzvot of gemilut chasadim, acts of lovingkindness, we are not only doing something nice for someone else and following God's commandment, but we are showing in our actions the highest form of loyalty and faith in God. It is in this way that we can show our submission to God's will and join with Him to make this world Holy, right, just, and kind.

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When Avraham shows kindness to people he doesn't know ... he shows his greatest loyalty to God.

Rabbi Marianne Novak

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Chayei Sarah

On Grieving



Rabba Sara Hurwitz

President and Co-Founder

Parshat Chayei Sarah begins with the death of Sarah. The Torah tells us that Avraham cried bitterly.

And Avraham came to eulogize Sarah, and bewail her (Bereishit 23:2).

Remarkably, this is the first act of mourning in the Torah, despite the fact that death has already appeared prominently. As such, we read this narrative as a paradigm for how future generations should mourn. Thus, the mefarshim examine Avraham's response and behavior, specifically, how he cried. Our attention is immediately drawn to the word "Ivchotah" (to bewail her) because the letter kaf in this word is smaller than the other letters. Poetically, it is this "kaf," according to the mefarshim, with its diminutive size, which captures the visceral and diminished emotional state of Avraham.

Rashi writes that Sarah's death was directly connected to the binding of her son; the moment she heard that Yitzchak had almost been slaughtered, "her soul fled from her." Perhaps, then, the smaller kaf implies that Avraham is weeping tears of guilt, as it was his actions which led to Sarah's death. Ramban suggests that Avraham came from his tent to Sarah's tent with a group of his friends to bewail her. The small kaf, then, may represent a devastated man, leaning over as he is surrounded and supported by his community of friends and neighbors.

The Ba'al Haturim suggests that the kaf is written smaller than the other letters to indicate that Avraham only cried for Sarah for a short time. "He did not mourn extensively, because she was old and had lived a full life." The small kaf, in this interpretation, represents tears of nostalgia or appreciation for time Avraham and Sarah spent together. Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, on the other hand, suggests that the diminutive form of the kaf indicates that although his grief was infinite, the full extent of Avraham's mourning was kept private, in the confines of his home. In this reading, the kaf is smaller to represent the internal, almost hidden, nature of Avraham's tears.

The Torah tells us Avraham cried, but we can only surmise how he actually felt. It is impossible for the commentators to agree on how Avraham mourned because there is no one right way. There are times that our tears are joyful or nostalgic as we reflect on the blessed and long life a loved one lived. At times we cannot cry at all in front of others, and we sob, uncontrollably, in the solitude of our bedrooms. Sometimes we cry because we weren't the child or sibling we wanted to be, so we shed tears of guilt and regret.

Sometimes, our tears are so devastating and debilitating that we rely on our friends to lift us figuratively and literally out of our deep despair.

In the end, if we remove the small kaf altogether, we are left with two words: "v'lev tah," which mean "and to have a heart for her." Avraham's grief is sincere and from the heart. His tears model for us the many and varied ways to grieve, and therefore demonstrate that there is no right way to cry when a loved one dies. But at the core of his grief is the hole, the missing "kaf" that Avraham now feels, as he mourns, in his own personal way, for his beloved wife.

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Sometimes, our tears are so devastating and debilitating that we rely on our friends to lift us figuratively and literally out of our deep despair.

Rabba Sara Hurwitz

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Unseen Threads – The Hidden Yearnings of Toldot



Rabbi Yali Szulanski

Class of '25

The story of Toldot weaves together the lives of Esav, Yitzchak, and Rivka—three figures whose experiences offer us distinct but interconnected insights into the complexities of human potential, identity, and vision. Esav's raw yearning for recognition, Yitzchak's quiet resilience in uncovering the hidden, and Rivka's courage to act on her vision of the future are threads that together form a tapestry of meaning. Each offers us a lens through which to better understand ourselves and the world around us.

Picture Esav returning from the field, exhausted and hungry. The Torah describes his entrance with vivid detail: "Esav came in from the field, and he was famished" (Bereishit 25:29). In his desperation, he trades his birthright for lentil stew, a choice so visceral that it is often dismissed as the impulsive act of a man who values the material over the eternal. Yet beneath this moment lies a deeper story: one of yearning, hidden potential, and the struggle to reconcile identity with destiny.

Esav is often portrayed as the quintessential hunter—earthy, compulsive, focused on the immediate. Yet his tears after Yaakov receives the blessing (Bereishit 27:34) reveal an ache that goes beyond material loss. His cry is raw and haunting, a window into his longing for connection and validation, emotions that have likely followed him his entire life. This complexity invites us to pause and consider how we perceive others. Are we too quick to reduce people to single-dimensional roles? What hidden yearnings and untapped potential might we overlook in those around us?

The Talmud (Bava Batra 16b) offers a nuanced view of Esav, suggesting that his world was not devoid of spirituality but was often overwhelmed by passion and poorly-channeled desire. Esav emerges not as a villain but as a tragic figure—someone whose immense potential was eclipsed by his inability to bridge the tension between his inner aspirations and outward actions.

From Esav's longing, we turn to Yitzchak's quiet persistence, a very different kind of journey. While Avraham's faith blazes and Yaakov's life unfolds in dramatic twists and turns, Yitzchak's narrative offers a quieter but equally profound lesson. His well-digging (Bereishit 26:18–22) is more than a practical act; it is a spiritual metaphor. Each well he reopens represents faith, patience, and an investment in the unseen.

Yitzchak's story teaches us that strength isn't always loud. It often lies in the persistence to uncover what is buried: the potential in a child, the possibilities in a strained relationship, or the hope in a fractured world. His wells remind us to look deeper, to search for what lies beneath the surface, and to trust in the possibility of growth even when the process is slow.

Finally, we come to Rivka, whose decisive role in Yaakov's blessing is as controversial as it is visionary. Her actions stem from a profound understanding of her children's destinies. Rivka perceives truths that are not immediately visible: Yaakov's capacity for leadership and Esav's limitations. Her choices call us to grapple with the tension between what is and what could be. How often are we, like Rivka, called to act not based on the present reality but on a future we envision? Her courage reminds us that true leadership sometimes requires making difficult decisions rooted in hope and foresight.

The themes of Toldot resonate deeply in a world where identities are too often reduced to surface impressions. In an age of quick judgments and fleeting interactions, we risk overlooking the complexities that shape each person's story. Like Esav, many of us yearn to be truly seen, not for our mistakes or external roles but for the deeper struggles, hopes, and intentions that define us. Esav's anguished cry reminds us how painful it is to feel unseen, a yearning that resonates universally.

Like Yitzchak, we are called to nurture hidden potential in ourselves and others. Uncovering what is buried takes patience, faith, and persistence. Often, the treasures we seek—within our own hearts or in those around us—require the slow, deliberate work of looking past the immediate and trusting in the possibility of growth.

And, like Rivka, we are sometimes tasked with seeing a future that feels just beyond reach. Her actions, though controversial, are rooted in her vision of what could be. Whether as parents, leaders, or friends, we are called to hold space for others' potential, guiding them toward a destiny they may not yet see for themselves.

The legacy of Toldot reminds us that identity, growth, and vision are layered and dynamic, often obscured by the noise of the moment. The Torah invites us to explore these unseen threads, to look beyond the obvious, and to recognize the hidden yearnings that shape our relationships and our world.

In quiet moments of reflection, in the persistence to uncover potential, and in the courage to envision a better future, we carry the message of Toldot forward. Let us dig wells, honor hidden depths, and embrace the unseen possibilities in ourselves and others. For it is in these unseen threads that the fabric of our world is woven.

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The legacy of Toldot reminds us that identity, growth, and vision are layered and dynamic, often obscured by the noise of the moment.

Rabbi Yali Szulanski

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A Thanksgiving Journey



Rabbanit Jenna Englender

Class of '19

In Parshat Vayeitzei, we watch as Yaakov sets off on a difficult journey. Afraid for his life at the hands of his murderously angry brother Esav, Yaakov heads for the land of Charan. Facing a long journey to a place he has never been, not knowing what awaits him, he lies down to sleep. In his famous dream with the ladder ascending to heaven, God comes to Yaakov and promises to protect him. Yaakov wakes up shaken and, as the Torah says,

And Yaakov made a vow, saying: If God remains with me, if He protects me on this journey that I am making, and gives me bread to eat and clothing to wear, and if I return safe to my father's house—the LORD shall be my God (Bereishit 28: 20-21).

There is something odd about Yaakov's vow. God has just shown him a miraculous vision, promising to protect him and remain with him. Yaakov responds to God's promise of protection with...a demand for protection. This response telegraphs a distinct lack of trust and a misunderstanding of where power truly lies. Yaakov somehow thinks that he can (and needs to) strongarm God into protecting him. He does not yet understand how this relationship works.

If we flash forward to next week's parsha, we see Yaakov get a second chance in a similar situation. This time, he is leaving Haran and returning home, back to where his angry brother is waiting for him. Yaakov is once again afraid of what might happen to him during this encounter and so he prays to God. Yet this time his prayer takes on a distinctly different tone:

Then Yaakov said, "O God of my father Avharam and God of my father Yitzchak, O LORD, who said to me, 'Return to your native land and I will deal bountifully with you!' I am small compared to all the loving kindnesses and the truth with which you have dealt with your servant. With my staff I crossed this Jordan and now I have become two camps. Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esav; else, I fear, he may come and strike me down, mothers and children alike" (Bereishit 32:10-12).

Rashi interprets Yaakov as saying he is unworthy of the kindnesses that God has bestowed upon him. Unlike when fleeing to Haran, there is no sense of entitlement here. He is not setting conditions for their relationship. Rather, Yaakov begins by outlining the strength that already exists in his relationship with God. This is who You are, he says, and this is who I am. We know each other. We trust each other. This is a relationship that will continue regardless of the outcome.

Yaakov then goes on to describe what is most important to him: he gathers in the people who are close to him and all the evidence of his hard work over the past two decades, and he recognizes that none of it would have been possible without God's grace and protection. Yaakov begins his request this time with gratitude. Only then does he turn to God and ask for God's mercy once again.

Around the time that this parsha is read each year, many of us in the United States will participate in the traditional holiday of Thanksgiving. The passengers aboard the Mayflower were no strangers to harrowing journeys. William Bradford, one of the passengers who eventually became the governor of Plymouth Colony, described the initial landing of the Mayflower in November of 1620 in *Of Plymouth*

Plantation. He speaks about how, upon arriving on the shores of the New World, the weary travelers dropped to their knees and began to recite tehillim:

“Being thus arived in a good harbor and brought safe to land, they fell upon their knees & blessed ye God of heaven, who had brought them over ye vast & furious ocean, and delivered them from all ye periles & miseries therof, againe to set their feete on ye firme and stable earth...Let them therefore praise the Lord, because He is good, and His mercies endure forever. Yea, let them which have been redeemed of the Lord, shew how He hath delivered them from the hand of the oppressor. When they wandered in the; desert wilderness out of the way, and found no city to dwell in, both hungry, and thirsty, their soul was overwhelmed in them. Let them confess before the Lord His loving kindness, and His wonderful works before the sons of men.”

It is not an accident that William Bradford chose to quote from Psalm 107. An edition of the Bible that Bradford brought with him to America still exists, and it contains a note on verse 32 of this psalm. The note is a quote from the Rambam, a citation from his halakhot of Birkat haGomel (the prayer of thanks-giving that a Jew recites when he or she has survived a life threatening situation). Says the Rambam:

“Four categories of individuals are required to offer thanksgiving: A person who had been sick and has recovered, a prisoner who has been released from prison, voyagers when they have landed, and travellers in the desert when they reach settled territory.”

Bradford and his fellow travelers knew that, according to Jewish tradition, this psalm was connected to a practice of giving thanks to God at the end of a journey. Incredibly, upon arriving in America the early settlers of this country recited their own version of Birkat haGomel: “Thank the Lord for He is good. His loving kindness is forever.” *This* was the first Thanksgiving.

The process of giving thanks does not come only at the end of a journey. Sometimes, it can mark the

beginning of a new one. Yaakov speaks of God’s chesed as he prepares to return home after two decades in exile. The pilgrims speak of God’s chesed as they prepare to build a new home in a land far from everything they’ve ever known. Their troubles were not over when they landed in Plymouth. They arrived in New England in the middle of winter, without shelter, food, or any knowledge of the area. There was so much to be afraid of, so much uncertainty. But, in that moment, these worn and tired travelers were overcome with the desire to thank God for everything that had sustained and protected them up until that point.

Perhaps this is the essence of what we are doing each November when, as the nights grow long and the weather turns cold, we gather with our families to share a delicious, abundant meal. Harrowing journeys show us just how vulnerable we are. Whether it is a difficult year we had personally, an illness, or fear of the many very real threats and injustices in our world, these moments make us realize how uncertain our future is. Yaakov and the pilgrims of the Mayflower teach us that it is precisely in this moment of vulnerability that we ought to seek to cultivate gratitude. We cannot know if our prayers will succeed in carrying us safely through the next journey, yet we know that we need to find a way to be thankful for what we have been given so far. We need to set aside time to take stock of our lives. What are our core values? Who are the people that form the center of our world? What are we proud of? What are we grateful for? We must challenge ourselves to answer these questions because it is this gratitude for what is good that, when lovingly and intentionally cultivated, will keep us warm and sustain us through the cold winter to come.

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When the Wound is the Blessing



Rabbanit Kate Rozansky

Class of '25

In this week's parsha, we meet Yaakov on the edge of his return home, preparing to face his brother Esav, after two decades of separation. This separation began when Yaakov's actions—his seizing of the birthright—enraged Esav so much that Yaakov fled, afraid for his life. Although the violent circumstances of Yaakov's exile are extreme, the fear Yaakov feels on the precipice of his return is far more common. Going home to your family after a separation can be terrifying, especially if you are coming home different. This is even truer if the separation occurred partly *because* you are different.

Every child whose identity shifts in some meaningful way may feel a bit like Yaakov. And our families may feel a bit like Esav: like a birthright has been stolen from them. This can happen even when the change that happens is holy, even when it is divinely sanctioned. While Esav's feelings of anger towards Yaakov may or may not be justified, the upheaval created by the shifting possession of the birthright is real enough to send Yaakov running into exile for twenty years. Yaakov's pursuit of God's blessing has created a void in his home. No one in this family is the same for it.

The night before he meets Esav, Yaakov is afraid. He prepares himself and his family for what he fears may be a painful and even deadly reunion.

Yaakov prays, "Save me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esav" (Bereishit 32:12). And then he has an unusual encounter.

Much has been written about the nature of Yaakov's wrestling with the mysterious man who finds him

alone on that fateful night. Who is this man? Why do they fight? And how does this fight affect Yaakov's future? I want to focus on one particular aspect of this encounter—Yaakov's injury—and its implications for his relationship with his brother.

Yaakov wrestles, and the stranger:

...wrenched Yaakov's hip at its socket, so that the socket of his hip was strained as he wrestled with him (Bereishit 32:26).

After he is wounded, Yaakov hangs on, demanding a blessing and receiving a name change. But perhaps the wound Yaakov receives, not the name change, is the answer to his prayer. Maybe the wound is the blessing. Or at least, it is the first blessing Yaakov receives that night.

Yaakov's years away have not been easy: he has been tricked, lied to, held captive, threatened, and embroiled in painful family struggles. In his exile, he has encountered God and created a family, but it has come at a cost. What began with ambition and deception has been maintained only through toil and heartache. It is not easy to become who you are. But Esav does not know about these struggles. After receiving the gifts Yaakov has sent ahead, all Esav can know is that, since he left home, Yaakov has grown wealthy and become a multitude. All that Yaakov has suffered is invisible to Esav—or it would have been, were it not for this night.

When Esav meets Yaakov, what does Esav see? A man surrounded by wealth, wives, and children, who has only thrived since robbing Esav of what he so dearly believed was his? Or a man whose twists and turns have brought him (almost) as much pain as they have joy? Does Esav see a successful thief or a brother crawling home? The wounding makes Yaakov's pain visible to Esav even from afar. As he approaches Esav, Yaakov "bows to the ground

seven times” (33:3). What does it look like for a man who has just received a potentially life-altering injury to lower himself to the ground and stand up again, seven times? How slowly would Yaakov have to move to bow like that? Did it hurt when he bent down? Did Yaakov stumble as he stood back up? Did he cry out?

Whatever Esav saw that day must have been harrowing. Perhaps it inspired empathy; perhaps it enabled Esav to fall upon Yaakov’s neck with kisses rather than with rage (Bereishit 33:4). This wound that changed Yaakov’s walk made it possible for Esav to see Yaakov’s vulnerability. Yaakov’s deception depended on his father Yitzchak’s lack of seeing, but Yaakov’s homecoming depends on how he appears to Esav, on Esav’s ability to see Yaakov’s weakness.

Before they speak, Esav embraces his brother, and only afterwards does Esav “lift up his eyes,” inquire about Yaakov’s blessings, and accept his gifts (Bereishit 33:9). This moment of acceptance does not result in a total repair of the brotherly bond. After this moment, these two will mostly go their separate ways. Perhaps a deeper reconciliation would have to be based on speech rather than sight. But total repair is not what Yaakov prayed for: Yaakov asked to be saved. And perhaps, because of his wounding, he was.

For those of you making your way home, may your walk not be painful. May the people who are coming to meet you see all of you (or at least, as much of you as they need to see) in order to receive you with love. And for those of you at home, waiting to receive: may you have keen vision, to spy out the places where we have been wounded and blessed—where angels’ hands have only just been.

“

May the people who are coming to meet you see all of you (or at least, as much of you as they need to see) in order to receive you with love.

Rabbanit Kate Rozansky

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Forgetting to Remember and Remembering to Forget



Rabbi Miriam Lorie

Class of '24

To-do lists, post-it notes, phone alarm reminders: all these are things that have helped me remember my obligations. My capacity to forget without these aides (and sometimes even with them) is impressive. But memory is complex and, fallible as it is, forgetting is not always simply an absence of memory. Sometimes forgetting has an important positive role to play in our inner lives.

I know I'm not alone in forgetting things, and have company in this week's parsha. Pharaoh's chief cupbearer, imprisoned with Yosef, is implored by Yosef:

"But remember me when all is well with you again, and do me the kindness of mentioning me to Pharaoh, so as to free me from this place" (Bereishit 40:14).

Yosef, here at his lowest point, has a tenacious idea for escape. Twice he asks the cupbearer to remember him, hoping perhaps that he will be offered a job in Pharaoh's staff.

A little later in the story, we read that Yosef's plan has come to naught:

Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Yosef; he forgot him (Bereishit 40:23).

Our commentators are interested in the double language in this verse. What does it mean to "not remember" and also "to forget"? For Rashi and

Rashbam, this is about both short-term and long-term memory lapse. For Ibn Ezra and Chizkuni, the first "zachar" means "mention." The cupbearer didn't mention Yosef to Pharaoh, and therefore he forgot him. This ties into a Jewish tradition of learning by speaking out loud:

Rabbi Eliezer had a student who would study quietly, and after three years he forgot all his studies (Eruvin 54a).

Not speaking yields forgetting.

The Midrash in Bereishit Rabbah 88:7 contains this beautiful image:

All day the cupbearer made mental notes, but an angel came and erased them. All day the cupbearer tied knots to remind himself, but an angel came and loosened them. Said God: You may forget him, but I will not!

I appreciate this read, which allows for the cupbearer's good intentions and which feels so relatable. I'm sure there's an angel who erases my mental notes too. And I also love how, in depicting human forgetting, the midrash makes space for the true Rememberer, God, to enter the scene when the time is right.

This isn't the end of the cupbearer's story, as, two years later, his memory is finally awakened. Pharaoh has a dream that cannot be interpreted, and the cupbearer finally remembers Yosef. The cupbearer's words here could, in fact, be a clue to his earlier forgetting:

"I must recall my faults this day" (Bereishit 41:9).

Before he can mention Yosef, the dream-interpreter sitting in prison, the cupbearer has an urgent recall. He tells Pharaoh of his past misdemeanours, of his time in prison, of the baker who was executed, and of the two dreams that were correctly interpreted. I can imagine Pharaoh batting the introduction away: he is only interested in hearing about this talented dream interpreter, after all. But from the cupbearer's perspective, it feels like a sudden outpouring of traumatic memory, not unlike survivors in our times who were silent for years, but, once they started speaking could not stop. The word "achat" (faults) seems unexpectedly negative in this context. The cupbearer has unstopped a bottle of his worst memories, including incarceration and the death of his close colleague.

The Or HaChayim on Bereishit 41:23 writes, "Perhaps the Torah wrote 'he forgot him' in order to hint that this was a deliberate act of forgetting." This explanation doesn't need to be read maliciously; sometimes a deliberate act of forgetting is necessary for healing.

The only issue here is that the cupbearer's act of self-preservation, however subconscious it was, came at the expense of Yosef, who languished in prison for two years longer than necessary. We know, with our readers' hindsight, that this was all part of God's plan for Yosef to emerge at the most opportune moment to prove his skills and insight to Pharaoh.

For us today, far from God's obvious providence, may we allow ourselves the forgetfulness that is sometimes necessary for self-preservation and healing, but may we be zealous when it comes to remembering others who need our help, even when doing so requires to-do lists, post-it notes, and phone alarm reminders.

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...memory is complex and, fallible as it is, forgetting is not always simply an absence of memory.

Rabbi Miriam Lorie

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Understanding Joseph Through Hilkhhot Ta'arovet



Sarah Pincus

Class of '26

In Parshat Miketz, Pharaoh wakes from dreams that leave him deeply unsettled. First, he dreams that seven thin cows eat seven well-nourished cows. Next, he dreams that seven shriveled ears of grain swallow seven healthy ears. Hoping to find some insight and comfort, he consults Egypt's greatest magicians, but they cannot interpret the dreams. Pharaoh's cupbearer then speaks highly of Yosef's interpretation skills and suggests that Pharaoh seek out his advice. To Pharaoh's delight, Yosef makes sense of both dreams.

In Bereishit 41, the repeated use of the root (shoresh) peh-tav-reish is striking. Often translated as "to solve" or "to decipher," in this context, it is understood as "to interpret." It appears seven times throughout the chapter.

This root may sound familiar because in Chapter 40, at the end of the previous parsha, when recounting Yosef's interpretations of the cupbearer and baker's dreams, the same shoresh is repeated seven times. Bereishit chapters 40 and 41 are the only places in Tanakh in which this root appears. Therefore, this act of interpreting seems to reflect something unique about Yosef's ability.

In Lekutei Halakhot (Orach Chayim, Hilkhhot Hanukkah 3:7), Rabbi Nosson, Rabbi Nachman of Breslov's preeminent student, describes Yosef's unique capacity to interpret Pharaoh's dreams. The first interpreters allowed the negative elements of the seven years of famine to overshadow the seven years of plenty. Their failure to recognize the "truth

and good" embedded in the dream kept them from grasping its meaning. Yosef, by contrast, understood that dreams contain both good and bad elements. Yet he did not let the fear of the coming famine eclipse the promise of abundance. Because Yosef could neutralize the dream's negative elements, he uncovered its deeper truth and took steps to lessen the famine's impact.

Rabbi Yoḥanan in the name of Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai teaches, "Just as it is impossible for the grain to grow without straw, so too it is impossible to dream without idle matters" (55a). Dreams contain layers, and the process of interpretation requires discerning significance in the details. Similarly, Rav Hisda teaches that "a dream not interpreted is like a letter not read," which Rashi understands to mean that the interpretation of a dream creates its meaning.

Conceptually, Rabbi Nosson's understanding reflects core principles underlying Hilkhhot Ta'arovet, the laws of mixtures in kashrut. In fact, he describes dreams as a ta'arovet, a mixture.

The Akeidet Yitzchak (29:1), a 15th-century Spanish scholar, likewise emphasizes the role of the interpreter in shaping a dream's meaning.

Since every person has a chance to receive revelations of such minute proportions... The fact that all kinds of subject matter may be contained in the dream, creating a picture of confusion, prompts the dreamer to consult an interpreter to sort it out for him... The art of the interpreter is to separate the message from the trivial contained in all dreams. It is this that Pharaoh referred to when he said to Yosef, "You hear a dream (with a view) to interpret" (Bereishit 41:15).

While not typically applied in practice, an individual's ability to discern the taste of a forbidden element within a mixture was said in early halakhic texts to determine its kashrut status. Similarly, the Rosh (Masechet Chullin 7:37), a 13th-century Talmudist, asserts that the standard for nullification depends on the moment when the individual recognizes the foods as forming a mixture. In other words, a person's interpretation of the mixture's status is crucial in determining the halakhic mechanisms available to neutralize it.

The Akeidet Yitzchak also invokes the ratio of 1/60 when discussing dreams. The principle holds that if a non-kosher substance mixes with a kosher one, and the kosher portion is sixty times greater in volume, the non-kosher taste becomes undetectable, rendering the mixture permissible. In the context of dreams, he writes

In some cases, an insignificant part of the dream contains something meaningful. In others, the proportion of the meaningful part may be very substantial... When our sages state that dreams equal 1/60 of prophecy (Berachot 57), they mean that the element of truth in a dream may be as insignificant as the amount of issur, forbidden ingredient, that can be assimilated in a large mass of permissible material.

Examining the interpretation of dreams in Parshat Miketz through the framework of Hilkhos Ta'arovet demonstrates that Yosef's unique skills were his ability to discern order within the confusion and prevent the negative from overwhelming the positive. While the first interpreters viewed the dream as equal parts good and bad, effectively rendering the entire "mixture" of the dream unfavorable, Yosef could identify the neutral elements within it. By accommodating the good, the bad, and the neutral, Yosef allowed the positive aspects to take precedence rather than letting the negative dominate.

As Parshat Miketz is always read on Shabbat Hanukkah, the Lekutei Halakhot concludes by connecting this manner of understanding dreams with the holiday.

And this is why we read Miketz on Hanukkah, because all of this [interpretation] is like the eight days of Hanukkah in which we light the Hanukkah candles, so that the 'light of love contained within knowledge' should shine, which is the true meaning of the seven years of plenty, which represent years of goodness.

Hanukkah is a story of ta'arovet, a mixture of both good and bad. Yes, oil was discovered that allowed the Maccabees to light the menorah, but it was found amidst the ruins of the Holy Temple. Yes, we celebrate the military victory of a small group of people triumphing over the mighty Greeks, yet this occurred during a time of internal conflict when Jews were fighting one another. While we often glorify the story of Hanukkah, it's actually a celebration of humble and complex miracles. Perhaps our celebration of Hanukkah reflects Yosef's interpretive skill in which he did not let the negative overshadow the positive.

May Hanukkah help us recognize the ta'arovot in our own lives, creating space for the good, the bad, and the neutral. And in moments of complexity, may Yosef's unique gift inspire us with the strength and insight to ensure that the good within the mix shines most brightly.

IN HONOR OF
Rabbanit Sarah B. Pincus,
great-granddaughter of
Saul Levine and Sophie Greenblatt Levine,
who would be so proud of her

Connecting Through the Nothingness of Grief



Rabbanit Atara Lindenbaum

Chaplaincy Coordinator

Class of '22

Genuinely joining in someone's pain is both the greatest work we can do as humans and among the most difficult tasks we face. Ironically, empathizing with those who are closest to us can be especially complicated, especially if our experiences diverge. Rachel and Yaakov's relationship in Sefer Bereishit is an example of this difficulty; they connected in love, life, and death, yet their experiences of loss and empathy diverged and met challenges.

Yaakov was so linked to Rachel that his connection is evident even in her death; while Rachel is not mentioned by name in Parshat Miketz or Parshat Vayigash, her presence is felt throughout the narratives. Rachel's death informs Yaakov's pain of losing Yosef and anxiety about losing Binyamin, such that he is forced into a mourning without comfort. While Yaakov's love for Rachel is expressed explicitly after their initial meeting, his love for her continues after her death in his deep attachment to her children.

Although Yaakov loved Rachel, one of their only conversations in the text reveals a moment of brokenness in their relationship. Rachel, after watching her sister Leah give birth to four children, turns to Yaakov in a famous cry:

"Give me children or I shall die" (Bereishit 30:1).

According to many commentators, Yaakov struggled to relate to Rachel's desperation for a child. After all, Yaakov had children, albeit from a different

woman. Could Yaakov relate to Rachel at that moment, who felt that she was worth nothing and could not even feel alive because she had no children of her own? Yaakov does not seem to empathize with Rachel and instead becomes angry, expressing:

"Can I take the place of God?" (Bereishit 30:2).

And yet, in the loss of Rachel and the seeming loss of her children, Yaakov seems to finally relate to Rachel's cry. Yehuda explains to Yosef, in his speech demanding that Binyamin not be taken captive, that Yaakov would be considered dead if he had to leave Binyamin's side:

We said to my lord, "The boy cannot leave his father; if he were to leave him, his father would die" (Bereishit 44:22).

In contrast, when Yaakov is indeed reunited with Yosef in Egypt, Yaakov's spirit is enlivened:

...the spirit of their father Yaakov revived (Bereishit 45:27).

Yaakov even describes his current situation with the same words that describe a woman in her barrenness or after a miscarriage. Yaakov, when talking about the loss of Yosef, uses the root word shin-kuf-lamed twice:

Their father Yaakov said to them, "It is always me that you bereave: Yosef is no more..." (Bereishit 42:36).

Yaakov here blames his sons for making him one who does not have a child. Later, when Yaakov acquiesces and allows Binyamin to descend on the journey to Egypt with his brothers, he says:

“As for me, if I am to be bereaved, I shall be bereaved” (Bereishit 43:14).

Yaakov has already experienced the loss of two children, Yosef and Shimon (who is currently in jail), and so he is giving into his pain of being a shakala, one who experiences the loss of a child. In using this word to describe his anxiety and loss of his children, Yaakov connects his pain to barren and childless women, namely Rachel.

Without Rachel to share in his grief of losing Yosef, Yaakov's pain is tragically a mirror of Rachel's pain in her barrenness. In addition to the lack of a partner in Yaakov's grief, Yosef's death had no evidence, no body to bury, no real proof of loss. Similarly, Rachel, in her infertility, experienced an ambiguous loss, one that had no body to bury; infertility is a void and loss that causes its sufferers to look into a black hole of nothingness.

Yaakov's pain is again connected to Rachel's in language. Rachel describes her pain to Yaakov with the word “ein,” expressing that, as a woman without children, Rachel felt like nothing. Yaakov, when describing the loss of Yosef, uses the word einenu repeatedly. The brothers describe Yosef as the brother who is einenu: just gone, into the void. Yaakov, without his beloved wife, lacking a proper burial for his presumed dead son, can feel this sense of ein, of nothingness in this world.

Yaakov's anger as a response to Rachel's pain of infertility may seem misplaced but also resonates with the experience of many couples who experience loss, particularly surrounding infertility. A couple's grief can take different forms for a variety of reasons, and cries of pain to one another can be misinterpreted as accusations to the ones closest to them. Yaakov loved Rachel, but her cry of nothingness landed on him in a way that may have blocked him from properly giving her care.

It is only in Rachel's absence that Yaakov can finally empathize with her; the loss or lack of a child caused both Rachel and Yaakov to lose their vitality. Rachel

and Yaakov became united in their deaths and in their mournings, perhaps when it was too late for them to connect. Rachel's cry as described by the prophet Yirmiyahu echoes her husband's grief:

A cry is heard in Ramah—Wailing, bitter weeping—Rachel weeping for her children. She refuses to be comforted For her children, who are gone (Yirmiyahu 31:15).

Rachel refuses to be comforted; her children are nowhere to be found. Yaakov similarly refuses to be comforted, when Yosef is nowhere to be found:

All his sons and daughters sought to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted (Bereishit 37:35).

Let the tears of Rachel, ones that still resound in our nation's memory, be a reminder of both the challenge and importance of giving voice to those who are experiencing loss of einenu—ambiguous pain that can be unseen, and let us find strength in our own presence, to bring comfort to even those who may refuse.

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IN HONOR OF
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Vayechi

Belligerent Prayer



Rabbanit Tanya Farber
Beit Midrash Program Faculty
Class of '21

Is this how one responds to women in distress? On your life, that your sons will [one day] stand [at mercy of] her son (Bereishit Rabbah 71:7).

Before Yosef is born, Yaakov rebuffs Rachel and her cry for children by saying “hatachat Elokim anochi?” (Can I take the place of God [who has denied you fruit of the womb?]) (Bereishit 30:2). And now, in Parshat Vayechi, in this final chapter of Bereishit, Yosef, whose father did not pray for his son’s birth but was pained by his disappearance, echoes those very words to his brothers. The brothers fear that since Yaakov has died, Yosef will avenge them for their mistreatment. Therefore, his brothers throw themselves before him, willing to be his servants if he will spare them. In this moment, Yosef unknowingly repeats his father’s words in reassuring his brothers:

“Hatachat Elokim ani? Can I take the place of God?”

But Yosef said to them, “Have no fear! Am I a substitute for God? Besides, although you intended me harm, God intended it for good, so as to bring about the present result—the survival of many people (Bereishit 50:19–20).

Though in both cases, “Can I take the place of God?” is an evasive response that dismisses the concern expressed, the two uses of the phrase occur in very different spoken contexts. Uttered by Yaakov to Rachel, the words seem heartless and cruel; from Yosef to his brothers, these words are kind and restorative.

The midrashic critique of Yaakov’s scornful remark links these two narratives, though the midrash is not explicitly based on the literary repetition of hatachat Elokim anochi in both accounts:

“Can I take the place of God?” is a surprising response from Yaakov, who challenged fate at every turn. Yaakov spent a lifetime manipulating events against their natural course and strategizing plans of actions: from following Rivka’s instructions to acquire the bechora (birthright) to breeding spotted speckled sheep to receive his payment from Lavan to preparing for his encounter with Esav.

Just as Yaakov did not intervene and pray for Rachel’s fertility, Yaakov plays no active role in the crises involving his children, namely the violation of Dina and Shimon and Levi’s genocidal rampage. The Torah says Yaakov waited and kept silent upon hearing that Dina was assaulted until his sons returned (Bereishit 34:5). Though not recorded in the text, perhaps Yaakov instructed his sons to rescue Dina but never encouraged Shimon and Levi’s atrocities. Only years later, in this parsha, does Yaakov, on his deathbed, strongly rebuke Shimon and Levi for their wrath and violence.

Yet, if we use midrash to supplement our story, Yaakov emerges in Shechem as the father who directly fights for his children. Shechem is the tragic nexus of his children’s tribulations. Dina’s rapist was named Shechem, and the entire people of Shechem were massacred in retaliation by Shimon and Levi. Shechem is the point of departure before Yosef’s abduction. Yaakov had sent Yosef to Shechem to check on his shepherding brothers when events unravel. Shechem thus symbolizes Yaakov’s culpability in Yosef’s story and is alluded to in this parsha.

“And I give to you Shechem [either translated as portion or city of Shechem] one more than to your brothers, which I wrested from the Amorites with my sword and bow” (Bereishit 48:22).

The verse attributes Shechem’s conquest to Yaakov, not to Shimon and Levi. Rashi tells a midrashic background story, not in the Torah text, of how the neighboring Canaanite armies attacked Shechem as a delayed response to Shimon and Levi, and Yaakov defended his entire family. The midrash imagines Yaakov as a patriarch who fights on behalf of his children in the very place of his family’s shame. In this portrayal, Yaakov reclaims the Shechem that represents his children’s troubles and perhaps his own failures as their father. Now, with the midrash grafted into the meaning of the text, Yaakov Avinu, at the end of his life, can pass on a revisionist legacy that is consistent with his greatness as expressed in other facets of his story.

A defining moment in Yaakov’s greatness is his wrestling with the angel. Yaakov’s confrontational spirituality is midrashically embedded in his bequest of Shechem to Yosef. Yaakov acquired Shechem through weaponry: my sword and my bow. The Talmud (Bava Batra 123a) renders these words as expressions of prayer: my sword is prayer and my bow is supplication.

If this were not Torah and Yaakov Avinu, the weapon metaphors for prayer seem heretical. Against Whom is he waging war? But this is Yaakov, who has been renamed Yisroel, the one who wrestles with God.

Said he, “Your name shall no longer be Yaakov, but Yisrael, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed” (Bereishit 32:29).

Thus, the very Yaakov who was alone on the river bank when he fought an angel uses spiritual ammunition, this time on behalf of his family in Shechem. Through midrash, Yaakov Avinu is transformed from a flawed but great man into an epic patriarch who directs his audacious prayers not

only for his personal survival but on behalf of his children. With militant prayers, Yaakov subverts the spiritual indifference he had once expressed in hatachat Elokim ani?

For Yosef, these words represent a theology. With this expression, Yosef reassures his brothers that he will not take revenge; for though they schemed to harm him, their actions were part of God’s greater plan to save an entire nation from famine.

We are heirs to the legacies of both Yaakov and Yosef, and to their contradictory modes of belligerent prayer and faith in God’s plan. Yosef trusts that the unfolding of our lives has greater context than our limited frame of reference. Yaakov challenges even God’s greater picture and demands an alternate destiny.

Like Yosef, surely, there are times in our lives when we look at our past setbacks and difficulties and see how these painful events were necessary for our own growth and accomplishments. More often than not, we cannot make meaning of tragedy. Misapplying Yosef’s faith would be spiritually toxic and heretical: to explain away why bad things happen and callously dismiss the suffering of others. Initially, the concept of Yaakov’s militant prayer seems the heretical construct, but rather it is the midrashic Yaakov and his confrontational spirituality that inspires us to engage with a God who has created and sustains a world of suffering and tragedy.

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Shemot

שְׁמוֹת

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Upstanding and the Qualities of a Leader



Ilana Gimpelevich

Class of '26

Parshat Shemot opens with a review of the entire household of Yaakov descending to Egypt. Coming on the heels of the narratives in Bereishit, one might expect to hear more about the greatness of Avraham's offspring and the eventual formation of a nation. Yet the narrative takes a sharp turn and descends into gloom: a new Pharaoh arises who no longer owes any gratitude to Yosef, the Jews are viewed as outsiders to be feared and controlled, and slavery appears to be the inevitable outcome. The Jews are presumed to be a lost people—either passively, through back-breaking labor, or actively, through elimination of the future generations.

Against this backdrop, Moshe emerges, an unlikely hero and savior of the Jewish nation. Moshe grew up in Pharaoh's palace, shielded from the suffering of the Jews by the privilege of passing as an Egyptian. He is blessed with what the average Jew could only dream of: survival and an opportunity to choose his path. Moshe could safely blend in as an Egyptian, forswear any affiliation to the Jews by birth, and join the ranks of the oppressors.

Yet Moshe, by his nature, is unable to sit back and reap the rewards of his privilege. He is referred to twice as having "grown up" (Shemot 2:10,11), noting not only his physical maturation but also his emotional development. When Moshe encounters an Egyptian abusing a Hebrew slave, the rest of the world stands by, conducting business as usual. Perhaps the Egyptians are unaware of the abuse. Perhaps they witness it and choose to look away. But Moshe intervenes on behalf of the Jew. The following day, when he witnesses two Jews fighting,

he could have walked past, attributing their conflict to an interpersonal struggle, far below his royal stature and concern. But instead he tries to break up the fight.

This activism leads Moshe to become a pariah, forcing him to flee to Midian. There he is a stranger in a strange land; a foreigner with no protection, no clout, no alliance. According to Rabbi Eliyahu Mizra-chi, a medieval commentator from Constantinople, Moshe finds himself at the well seeking shelter and a place to sleep. Yet when he witnesses shepherds molesting the daughters of Yitro (Tanchuma), he is unable to hold back. Once again he intervenes on their behalf, saves them, and waters their flock. Moshe cannot help but act out of a profound sense of justice.

According to Abarbanel, Moshe's inability to be a mere bystander, his need to intervene and "fix" without regard for personal consequences, shaped his development as a leader. His growth is charted through these narratives. At first glance, the verses seem to describe the chronological order of events. Upon closer examination, however, a conceptual consistency emerges that demonstrates Moshe to be "just and righteous and great of heart" (Abarbanel 2:15). When Moshe intervenes on behalf of the Jew by slaying the Egyptian, he forever links his destiny with his Jewish brethren, demonstrating sensitivity to the oppressed. When Moshe intervenes in the argument of two Jews, he shows concern for his fellows and that their well-being is not below his dignity. Finally, at the well, when Moshe rescues the daughters of Yitro, he does so out of a sense of justice. Moshe does not act expecting a reward, as Malbim notes, for otherwise he would have followed the Midianite women to their father's house. It is Yitro who inquires of his daughters where the Egyptian man who rescued them could be found.

Once Moshe has demonstrated his leadership skills, he merits to receive prophecy and to be the rescuer of the Jewish people. In the next chapter, Moshe notices the burning bush but cannot pass without investigating the phenomenon. He cannot help but turn toward the fire. While the famous dictum of “I am with him in trouble” (Tehillim 91:15) is representative of Hashem’s metaphorical suffering alongside the Jewish nation, for Moshe, turning towards the fire represents his readiness as a leader. Moshe demonstrates himself to be capable of handling the deeply uncomfortable situations in which a leader finds himself and remaining with his flock. Moshe is ready to jump into adversity and rescue his people if that is what is required. The first obstacle is Egypt, followed by the Red Sea, the desert and its harsh conditions, wars, and the golden calf. At some points in the narrative, Hashem offers Moshe a way out: separate yourself from this nation, and you will merit to be a progenitor of greatness while the Jews will receive what they justly deserve. But Moshe, as he always has in the past, chooses not to look away, not to separate, but to continue pleading with Hashem on behalf of the Jews.

The book of Shemot begins with the precipitous downfall and enslavement of the Jewish people, but it also points to their ultimate redemption. Against the backdrop of Egyptian society that was driven by social and economic strata and that advanced cruelty, Moshe quickly emerges as a leader who is able to transcend class and assert kindness. Moshe is the paradigmatic upstander, modeling moral and courageous leadership, just the kind that will be needed to save the Jewish people.

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Moshe is the paradigmatic upstander, modeling moral and courageous leadership, just the kind that will be needed to save the Jewish people.

Ilana Gimpelevich

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Carrying and Growing from Our Memories



Rabbanit Bracha Jaffe

Class of '17

By the time we reach Parshat Vaera, we know Moshe well. We have followed him from the moment he was a baby placed in a basket on the Nile and then jolted awake to the suffering of his own people. We have watched him strike the Egyptian, hide the body, and flee for his life to Midyan. And then comes his defining moment: the burning bush.

God chooses Moshe to be the leader of Bnei Yisrael. But from the very beginning, Moshe hesitates, not because he doubts God but because he doubts himself.

When God speaks to him at the burning bush, Moshe protests. He offers many reasons, but the final one feels especially revealing:

“I am not a man of words,” Moshe says. “I never have been, not in the past, not recently, not even since You, God, began speaking to me. I am heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue.”

Often this is understood as a speech impediment. But it may be something broader that Moshe has carried for a long time: “I’m not articulate. I’m not charismatic. People won’t listen to me. They won’t believe me. They won’t follow me.”

Leadership, Moshe fears, requires a kind of presence he does not think he has ever possessed. God responds not by dismissing Moshe’s fear but by reassuring him: you will not do this alone. Your

brother Aharon will be with you. Aharon will speak, and you, Moshe, will act.

Together, God tells Moshe, you will stand before Pharaoh—Aharon as the spokesperson, Moshe as the man of action. With that promise, Moshe accepts the role.

I believe that what Moshe brings into this moment begins much earlier, all the way back at the start of his life. The Yalkut Shimoni teaches that Moshe was called by many names, each reflecting a different way he was seen. And yet, the Midrash in Shemot Rabbah notes that despite all those names, God calls him only Moshe, the name given him by Pharaoh’s daughter because “I drew him out of the water.”

Rabbi Abraham Twersky explains that God’s choice of this name points to the enduring power of early experience. What is named early, he writes, leaves an imprint. His adoptive mother, Bat-Par’o, may have told him how she found him in the Nile, how she reached into the water and drew him out. And perhaps his birth mother, Yocheved, who raised him until he was weaned, told him the story as well, because at some point Moshe would have asked why, after being nursed and held, he had to go to the palace. The story of his rescue was likely woven into his sense of self from the very beginning.

The Torah and our sages remind us that early experiences, especially those that are remembered and retold, do not disappear. They shape who we become and how we lead. Everything builds toward the moment in our parsha when Moshe confronts Pharaoh. We might assume that now Moshe will step fully into power, yet something surprising happens.

When it comes time to initiate the first plagues, Moshe does not act. Instead, God tells Moshe to tell Aharon to act. For the plague of dam, Aharon strikes the Nile and turns its waters to blood. For tzefardeya, Aharon raises his staff over the Nile and brings forth frogs. For kinim, Aharon strikes the land and lice emerge.

Only after these first plagues does Moshe resume direct action.

If Aharon was appointed because Moshe feared speaking, why is Aharon now the one acting when no speech is required at all? Moshe could have raised the staff himself. He could have struck the water or the land. Why, then, does God insist that Aharon initiate these first blows?

Rashi offers a clear answer. Moshe cannot strike the Nile because the waters once protected him; as a baby in a basket, the river carried him to safety. To strike it now would be a denial of gratitude. And Moshe cannot strike the land because the ground once protected him as well, concealing the body of the Egyptian he killed, the one who was beating a Jewish slave. It is a powerful teaching: gratitude extends even to water, even to earth.

But the water and earth did not only protect him. They also hold earlier fears: a baby separated from his mother, set adrift and vulnerable and, later, a moment of conflict when Moshe realized that he was no longer safe and had to run.

God is making room for what Moshe carries, not only out of gratitude but because some places hold memory. By assigning the first plagues to Aharon, God gives Moshe time not to retreat, but to act later with clarity and presence.

In his book *Us*, Terrence Real describes how, under stress, we often respond from what he calls our “Adaptive Child:” the younger part of us that learned long ago how to survive. But there is also what he calls the “Wise Adult,” the part of us that can pause, choose, and act with intention.

One of the truths of adulthood is that we do not arrive here untouched. We all bring our childhood with us: early fears, habits of self-protection, scars. When we don’t recognize what shaped us, those old fears act for us. Growth is not about erasing the past; it is about cultivating the capacity to choose how we respond.

In Parshat Vaera, the Torah shows us another way forward. By instructing Aharon to act, God makes room for what Moshe carries and, in doing so, shapes how Moshe later steps forward, with greater clarity and intention. That is not avoidance; it is divine wisdom.

“

One of the truths of adulthood is that we do not arrive here untouched.

Rabbanit Bracha Jaffe

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IN HONOR OF
Yeshivat Maharat

Is Pharaoh Feeling Guilty?



Rabbanit Sarah Kaufman

Class of '25

The plague script is well known: Pharaoh refuses to let the Israelites leave to worship God, Moshe and Aharon threaten Pharaoh with a plague, Pharaoh still says “no,” a plague ensues, Pharaoh calls back Moshe and Aharon to plead that they stop the plague, and Moshe or Aharon or both make it happen through God’s intervention. We see this sequence of events play out multiple times, both in this week’s parsha, Parshat Bo, and last week in Parshat Vaera.

But a closer look at these conversations reveals multiple unexpected phrases. Twice Pharaoh admits his guilt, saying “I have sinned.” We see this diction first after the plague of hail, when Pharaoh says:

“I sinned this time, God is righteous and I and my people are evil” (Shemot 9:27).

This is quite a statement from Pharaoh, calling himself and his entire people evil. Ostensibly, Pharaoh’s sin is refusing to allow Bnei Yisrael to worship God in the desert. Yet it’s interesting that Pharaoh also calls attention to the sin of the Egyptian people. Perhaps he recognizes that Egyptians perpetuate an immoral system and even help kill Israelite children.

Still, we must remember Moshe’s and Aharon’s request is not to free the Israelite people. Rather, they simply want to go into the wilderness for three days and observe a festival for God. Moshe never requests complete freedom. But whenever Pharaoh concedes, offering to let just the men leave or to let everyone leave without their flocks, Moshe provides

a technical reason that the offer isn’t sufficient. All of Bnei Yisrael and their animals must go as well. Pharaoh grows increasingly suspicious, but neither of them explicitly acknowledges the possibility that Moshe is deceiving Pharaoh.

Perhaps, then, the sin of Pharaoh and his nation lies in not recognizing God’s power and commands. In the first conversation between Pharaoh and Moshe, Pharaoh admits:

“I do not know God” (Shemot 5:2).

Pharaoh’s second admission of guilt occurs after the locusts. He says:

“I have sinned against Hashem your God and you” (Shemot 10:16).

In these two instances, Pharaoh does not mention the Egyptian nation but instead focuses on his own wrongdoing toward God and toward “you,” “lachem.” Many commentators assert that this acknowledgement of guilt serves as an apology to Moshe and Aharon for harshly kicking them out of the palace during their earlier conversation. Yet this is strong language for such a banal action. “Lachem” is in the plural and could refer to Moshe and Aharon, but it could also represent an admission of guilt toward all of Am Yisrael. In this context, the sin would not be enslaving the Israelites, since this point would not even be relevant to the conversation. Moshe is merely asking to go worship God in the desert for three days. In this reading, then, Pharaoh’s admission of guilt would be for refusing to allow Am Yisrael their sojourn. It would concern religious freedom rather than servitude.

The final plague, death of the firstborn, breaks through Pharaoh’s last bit of resistance. In his final conversation with Moshe and Aharon, Pharaoh concedes and allows all of Bnei Yisrael and their

flocks to leave for their festival. Yet he ends with a strange line:

“Take also your flocks and your herds as you said and leave, and bless me as well” (Shemot 12:32).

The commentators struggle with this last clause. Why would Pharaoh ask Moshe and Aharon for a blessing? Rashi cites the midrash and says Pharaoh himself was a firstborn, so he was worried for his own life. This explanation is strained, as all the firstborns had already been killed. Pharaoh had clearly been spared, so why would he be killed now?

Ramban offers an alternate explanation: Pharaoh is asking for no further punishments for his treatment of the Israelites, though again, it had been made clear the plagues would cease with the Israelites’ departure, so this explanation also faces some challenges. The Or HaChaim adds simply that Pharaoh is asking for help in rebuilding Egypt. But his use of the singular, “bless *me* as well,” may cast doubt on this explanation.

This clause feels like a last-minute plea in a moment of desperation. Perhaps Pharaoh panics as the devastation of the plagues finally hits him. He realizes the full extent of God’s power and recognizes his wrongdoings in the earlier conversations. Though Pharaoh is hardly a monotheist, polytheists can believe in God while still believing in their own deities. Asking Moshe and Aharon for a blessing (presumably from God through them) may be a way of acknowledging his defeat. It has been made clear to him and all of Egypt that God is triumphant and is the more powerful one, which was a justification for the plagues all along:

“The Egyptians will know I am God when I stretch out My hand over Egypt and bring out Bnei Yisrael from their midst” (Shemot 7:5).

Though Pharaoh will later chase down Bnei Yisrael when he realizes that they do not plan to return

from their three-day journey, he now knows God and concedes God’s power. He realizes that he needs the blessing of God. It’s not teshuva, but perhaps it is a good first step.

“

Ostensibly, Pharaoh’s sin is refusing to allow Bnei Yisrael to worship God in the desert. Yet it’s interesting that Pharaoh also calls attention to the sin of the Egyptian people.

Rabbanit Sarah Kaufman

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Beshalach

Moshe — General or Rabbi?



Rabbanit Leah Fine

Class of '24

...and it would be, whenever Moshe raised his hand, Yisrael prevailed, and whenever he set down his hand, Amalek prevailed. Now Moshe's hands were heavy, so they took a stone and placed it under him, and he sat down on it while Aharon and Chur supported his hands, one on this-side and one on this-side. So his hands remained steadfast, until the sun came in (Shemot 17:11-12).

These verses from Parshat Beshalach can be read in disparate ways. Mishna Rosh HaShana 3:8 demystifies the battle between Israel and Amalek and derives moral meaning from this episode: As long as the Jewish people turned their eyes upward and subjected their hearts to their Father in Heaven, they prevailed, but if not, they fell.

On the other hand, there is a potentially militaristic reading. Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir, the Rashbam, understands v'gavar Yisrael, and Israel prevailed, as tactical orders, directing his forces on the battlefield. When the Israelite army saw Moshe raise up "the staff of God" (verse 9), they attacked Amalek. When the staff was lowered, Israel retreated. The Rashbam's student, Rabbi Joseph ben Isaac Bechor Shor, went further. For him, the lowering of the staff was a signal to the soldiers in reserve to move forward in battle. It turns out that Josephus, and numerous midrashim, support that militaristic interpretation as well.

Rabbi Avraham ben Meir Ibn Ezra completely rejects the military explanations of Rashbam, though, asserting that the Mishna had it right. Bnei Yisrael were victorious when they “turned their eyes upward and subjected their hearts to their Father in Heaven.” But when they did not, they fell. In other words, whatever military language Rashbam and Bechor Shor see is only secondary to the theological response.

As Israel has faced various physical and ideological barrages in recent years, this dispute between Rashbam and Ibn Ezra has come increasingly to the fore. Many of us have had our spiritual interpretations shaken, or at least broadened. We have come to understand the military implications of “And Israel prevailed.”

General Amir Eshel, former commander of the Israeli Air Force, reads Parshat Beshalach as a modern military tactician. In his 2016 Hebrew article on 929.org, “The First War of Liberation,” General Eshel sees four military principles at play in our story:

1. Civic Leadership.

Moshe stands on top of a hill, with his “steady” hands—(literally “faith”)—“*Vayehi yadav emunah*”—supported by Aharon and Chur. This steadiness instills a fighting spirit into the forces.

2. Military command.

Moshe demonstrated competence as a commander: “Yehoshua did as Moshe told him and fought with Amalek” (Shemot 17:10).

3. Warriors.

Moshe instructed Yehoshua to carefully choose soldiers based on their skills and suitability for battle. “Moshe said to Yehoshua, ‘Pick some troops for us, and go out and do battle with Amalek’” (Shemot 17:9).

4. Investigation.

After the military victory, God commands Moshe to “Inscribe this in a document as a reminder, and read

it aloud to Yehoshua” (Shemot 17:12). There will be opportunities in the future to apply the lessons learned from this war, and that may be one of the reasons to document it immediately after the war.

General Eshel views Moshe’s military capabilities through the lens of an experienced general. This battle was a turning point for Bnei Yisrael. Moshe’s implementation of civic leadership, military command, warriors, and investigation were the keys to victory.

Is it possible to understand these two approaches as complementary and not contradictory? Perhaps the Israelite warriors followed Moshe’s battle signals and gained confidence in God when they witnessed Moshe’s outstretched arms. Chazal certainly thought so.

As contemporary Jews, we need ongoing reassurance and solidarity. We need, as our ancestors did, the skills of Moshe, the military leader, and the emunah, the steadfastness, of Moshe Rabbenu, our rabbi and spiritual teacher.

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Yitro

From Hierarchical Leadership to Democracy



Chana Borow

Class of '26

In Parshat Yitro, we see an astonishing act of leadership and humility from Moshe Rabbeinu that shapes how we think about leadership for all time to come. We see Moshe Rabbeinu, already a great leader, recognize, with the help of Yitro, that he needs to take a step back and delegate for his own well-being and the well-being of Bnei Yisrael. Moshe is able to recognize that Yitro, his father-in-law and a priest of Midian, has many more years of leadership experience under his belt. Yitro had been in Moshe's shoes before, a man with limited time and capacity, called upon to solve seemingly endless dilemmas. Moshe recognizes his caring father-in-law for the leader that he is and learns from this elder even though they emerged from very different communities. This willingness to learn from a leader who comes from a world apart is remarkable.

Moshe approaches Yitro with the utmost respect:

Moshe went out to meet his father-in-law; he bowed low and kissed him; each asked after the other's welfare, and they went into the tent (Shemot 18:7).

Even though Moshe is the most powerful and well-respected person in Bnei Yisrael, he takes the time out of his day to go out and meet Yitro. He does so with bows and kisses, demonstrating humility, trust, and love. Moshe goes one step

further, showing an acceptance of Yitro and his culture:

And Yitro, Moshe's father-in-law, brought a burnt offering and sacrifices for God; and Aharon came with all the elders of Yisrael to partake of the meal before God with Moshe's father-in-law (Shemot 18:12).

Moshe not only shows Yitro an immense amount of respect, but he also shares in Yitro's religious practices. While Moshe is not specifically mentioned in this verse, the Ibn Ezra explains that this all took place in Moshe's tent, and therefore the Torah does not need to add Moshe to the verse. Yitro, a priest of another nation, gave a korban, a sacrifice, to God. According to Ibn Ezra, "for God" tells us that this is a sacrifice to Hashem, to affirm Hashem as the one true God and to thank Him. It is not obvious that Moshe and Aharon would be okay with accepting a sacrifice from someone who used to be the priest of another nation, a nation that worshiped other gods. But Moshe realizes that Yitro's past can be an asset to him:

"Have them bring every major dispute to you, but let them decide every minor dispute themselves. Make it easier for yourself by letting them share the burden with you..." (Shemot 18:22).

Here we see Moshe Rabbeinu, the quintessential Jewish leader, acknowledge how much he can learn from a leader of a different nation. Moshe is able to continue on as a strong leader because of the skills in delegation that he learned from Yitro.

Sometimes, as a leader, it seems easier to just do everything by yourself. It's easy to believe that this is the only way to get things done correctly. Yitro holds Moshe's hand through this process of giving up some control, helping him make space for others and their imperfections. Moshe is used to a hierarchical style of leadership. He grew up with Pharaoh as his primary role model, a man who did not relinquish control for anything. But then Yitro

enters and shows Moshe a more democratic way that is not only better for the leader but also better for the community.

Yitro helped Moshe bring a nation of slaves into a system of democracy where everyone's voice is heard and matters and which ultimately allows Bnei Yisrael to thrive.

We can learn a lot from Moshe's receptivity here. When leaders from different nations, traditions, and religions come together, we achieve a richer understanding of the world around us and our own communities. Especially in hard times, when it is so easy to stay siloed, we need to push ourselves to be more like Moshe Rabbeinu, seeing humanity and wisdom in sources outside of ourselves so that we, and our wider worlds, can thrive.

“

**Sometimes, as a leader,
it seems easier to just do
everything by yourself.**

Chana Borow

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Mishpatim

Justice: Both Earthly and Divine



Rabbi Rina Krautwirth

Class of '23

Parshat Mishpatim starts with the following verse:

These are the rules that you shall set before them (Shemot 21:1).

The parsha then lists a series of laws that govern justice in day-to-day life.

Rashi and other commentators address two related textual issues in the first pasuk of the parsha: the use of the letter vav in v'ayleh and the textual juxtaposition between this section and the preceding sections. Rashi comments that the "vav" indicates that just as the Ten Commandments in the preceding section were given at Sinai, so too, these commandments were given at Sinai. Nechama Leibowitz points out that the supercommentaries on Rashi find Rashi's comments puzzling: were not all the commandments given at Sinai? Leibowitz quotes one source, the Beir Yitzchak, who quotes the Terumat Hadeshen, who offers the following solution to Rashi's puzzling comment: the laws of mishpatim, justice, presented in this parsha so closely follow human nature that one might have thought that Moshe himself had written them, according to the way of the world. The Torah therefore quietly asserts that, in fact, God presented these commandments.

Ramban (21:1 s.v. And these are the ordinances) views the laws of justice that appear in Parshat Mishpatim as intricately tied to the Ten Commandments. For example, the Ten Commandments instruct us not to covet. However, only by knowing

the laws regarding property would we correctly know what not to covet. Ramban adds, “And thus did the Rabbis say in Midrash Rabbah: ‘The whole Torah depends on justice; that is why the Holy One, blessed be He, gave the civil laws directly after the Ten Commandments.’” In order for the laws of the Torah to operate, justice must operate as well.

Although this parsha establishes the connection between earthly justice and the Divine, it also points to human involvement in interpreting these laws of justice. Put differently, this parsha provides a crucial example of the primacy of Torah Shebaal Peh, the Oral Law. Shemot 21:22–25 states:

When [two or more] parties fight, and one of them pushes a pregnant woman and a miscarriage results, but no other damage ensues, the one responsible shall be fined according as the woman's husband may exact, the payment to be based on reckoning. But if other damage ensues, the penalty shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.

Rashi here, and in Vayikra 24:20 and Devarim 19:21 where the verse repeats, takes care to point out that our Rabbis have taught that these verses refer to monetary compensation. The Babylonian Talmud, in tractate Bava Kamma starting from page 83b, devotes many pages to discussing why we should not read *ayin tachat ayin* (an eye for an eye) literally, with no fewer than fifteen proofs in favor of reading the verse figuratively. Rashi comments on the Gemara's first explanation that it offers alternate explanations in case someone does not find the first one satisfactory. Thus, the Rabbis clearly speak out against a literal reading of what came to be termed *lex talionis*, the law of retaliation. Without Torah Shebaal Peh, we might not correctly understand the law.

At the end of the parsha, the tone of the text shifts, and the subject suddenly turns to spiritual matters.

Moshe ascends Har Sinai, and there God meets him. What significance can we find in this sudden shift from the earthly laws of justice to this heavenly spiritual encounter? Perhaps we can learn from this transition that only when justice prevails in the land and when society functions in a fair and equitable fashion can the shekhina dwell amongst us.

Earlier in the parsha, we saw that the Ten Commandments and the laws of justice were contextually linked. Here at the end of the parsha, we see a similar linkage between Moshe ascending Har Sinai and the laws of justice. Thus, the Torah presents the laws of justice between two heavenly encounters, perhaps to teach the divine origin of justice but also to present justice as a prerequisite for our spiritual well-being.

“

**...only when justice prevails
in the land and when society
functions in a fair and equitable
fashion can the shekhina
dwell amongst us.**

Rabbi Rina Krautwirth

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The Partnership Between God and Humans



Rabbi Dr. Susan Hornstein

Class of '25

“Let my people go, that they may serve Me”.

This mantra is repeated throughout the early portions of Sefer Shemot. The first part of the sentence is accomplished by Parshat Beshalach: Bnei Yisrael are free from Egyptian bondage. But freedom was not the end goal. They must serve God, first in the desert and ultimately in the land chosen by God, Eretz Yisrael.

The second segment of Sefer Shemot takes place primarily at Har Sinai. In fact, Bnei Yisrael remain there for ten months. Har Sinai has already been important in the story, since Moshe's initial meeting with God at the burning bush was said to have taken place there, and Moshe's first meeting with Aharon before they approached Pharaoh took place there too. Of course the revelation of the Torah takes place there, and Moshe ascends the mountain both times that he receives the Tablets. Now, the foot of Har Sinai is the location where Bnei Yisrael will build the mishkan, the Tabernacle, which will be the portable extension of Har Sinai as the meeting place with God and the place where the service of God will take place.

The laws describing the building of the mishkan and its contents begin in this parsha. It is the first act of creation of the new People of Israel. Until now, God has been the Creator. But now, God will command an act of creation, and Bnei Yisrael will execute it.

Before Bnei Yisrael have a chance to actually build the mishkan, a human will take over another act of

creation from God. After the revelation on Har Sinai, Moshe ascended the mountain and received the tablets, carved by the finger of God. These tablets were the ot brit, the physical symbol and reminder of the covenant forged between God and Bnei Yisrael upon the revelation of the Torah. But, as we read in Parshat Ki Tisa, this covenant was not sustainable. It contained no room for human fallibility. And when the people failed, as humans will, by building the golden calf, this covenant and its symbol, the God-made tablets, were broken. Moshe must ascend Har Sinai again and negotiate a new covenant.

This covenant contained the essential element of teshuva, allowing recovery from sin through repentance. The new tablets, the ot brit of the new covenant, were a joint project, commanded by God, but created by Moshe.

The first article that God commands to be built is the *aron*, the Ark. The Torah describes the design and materials for the Aron, and then states:

“Place into the Ark the Testimony that I will give you” (Shemot 25:16).

Later, when Moshe retells this story before entering Canaan, he says:

“Then I left and went down from the mountain, and I deposited the tablets in the ark that I had made, where they still are, as Adonai had commanded me” (Shemot 10:5).

The edut, the testimony, seems to be the tablets, the symbol of the covenant. But which tablets? The consensus of the commentaries seems to be that both sets of tablets were carried in the *aron*—the original set, carved by God and broken by Moshe,

and the second set, commanded by God and carved by Moshe.

Earlier in Shemot, we read about another symbolic reminder of a covenant. After God begins the process of providing manna for Bnei Yisrael during their travels in the wilderness, we read:

And Moshe said to Aharon, “Take a jar, put one omer of manna in it, and place it before Adonai, to be kept throughout the ages.”

As Adonai had commanded Moshe, Aharon placed it before the edut, to be kept (Shemot 16:33-34).

Although the aron had not yet been built, the Torah mentions that Aharon placed the jar of manna “before the edut,” leading us to believe that the jar of manna was also placed in the aron. The manna itself was a bit of a paradox: food was generally grown by humans but was here produced by God. The manna also represented the first time that God demanded obedience from the new People of Israel, as they were commanded to observe Shabbat in the context of the manna.

Throughout the rest of their travels, Bnei Yisrael carried the mishkan, a place in which humans emulated God’s act of creation of the world by creating a meeting place between humans and God. In it, they built the aron, which carried the tablets, now broken, that were created by God, the tablets commanded by God but created by Moshe, and the flask of manna, the food created by God.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in *Covenant and Conversation*, has a fascinating interpretation of the two sets of tablets. He explains that the first tablets, produced entirely by God, represent the Torah Shebichtav, the written Torah, produced entirely by God and revealed to Moshe and Bnei Yisrael during the revelation on Har Sinai. The second tablets, a partnership between God and Moshe, represent Torah Shebaal Peh, the Oral Torah, which is produced throughout the rest of time

through human interpretation of the written Torah.

Rabbi Sacks says:

The difference between the Written and Oral Torah is profound. The first is the word of God, with no human contribution. The second is a partnership—the word of God as interpreted by the mind of man (Covenant and Conversation, Ki Tissa, 5767, 5773).

Torah is incomplete without both segments: the entirely divine segment and the segment in which humans interpret and apply its laws and guidance. This human involvement is what ensures Torah’s applicability in every day and age. Bnei Yisrael carried the aron with them throughout their journeys, ultimately installing it in the Beit Hamikdash.

Within it, they carried the reminders of God’s covenants and God’s partnership with humans in creating and sustaining Bnei Yisrael. Our relationship with God is a partnership, and the Torah is a partnership; it is incomplete without our active involvement and application of its laws to our own lives.

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Ann and Jeremy
who contribute so much!

Garments of Glory to Those Who Seek None



Rabbanit Yael Smoocha

Class of '21

Moshe's name does not appear in this parsha. In fact, it is the only parsha in the books of Shemot, Vayikra, and Bamidbar that makes no mention of his name. All of God's instructions are addressed to Moshe, yet he is not named.

One of the first passages of Tetzaveh instructs Moshe to have honorary garments designed for his brother Aharon, the High Priest. These garments are instructed to be designed by the best artisans from the finest red, purple, and blue dyed wool of the times and adorned with gold and gems. Not only is Moshe instructed to dress his brother in these extravagant garments, but he is also instructed to have his four nephews, Aharon's sons, dressed in a dignified priestly wardrobe as well. He does this despite the fact that his own sons have not been, and will never be, appointed for leadership.

In short, the parsha asks Moshe to strip himself of his ego and his name, put all feelings aside, and lavish upon his brother and his brother's children garments whose sole purpose is to bring "honor and adornment" (Shemot 28:2).

Among the accessories that Aharon wears is the breastplate with twelve gemstones, each representing an Israelite tribe. According to the rabbis, Aharon earns this beautiful breastplate through his generosity of spirit. When Moshe is chosen by God to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, his older brother Aharon welcomes him back to Egypt with joy in his

heart (Shemot 4:14). Rashi describes this moment in the midrash from Shabbat 139a:

"And when he [Aharon] sees you [Moshe, he will be glad in his heart": not as you [Moshe] believe, that he will be angry with you because you have attained a high position. In consequence of this, Aharon was privileged to wear the ornament of the breastplate which was placed over his heart (Shabbat 139a).

This relates to a general principle stated by the rabbis in Eruvin 13b:

Anyone who humbles himself, the Holy One, Blessed be He, exalts him, and anyone who exalts himself, the Holy One, Blessed be He, humbles him. Anyone who seeks greatness, greatness flees from him, and, conversely, Anyone who flees from greatness, greatness seeks him.

Indeed, the Torah asks Moshe to bring "Aharon close" (Shemot 28:2), implying that Aharon shied away from honor and needed a bit of encouragement to accept his prestigious role.

Moshe is indeed a strong candidate for ego-shrinking challenges. Called the most humble of men (Bamidbar 12: 3) Moshe's ego seems to be nonexistent. This is clearest when his attendant Yehoshua observes men prophesying freely in the camp. He fears that Moshe's authority is being threatened since Moshe's capacity for prophecy is now shared by others, and he seeks for Moshe to have them restrained. Meanwhile, Moshe's response is:

“Are you wrought up on my account? Would that all the LORD’s people were prophets, that the LORD put His spirit upon them!” (Bamidbar 11:29).

In other words, “Are you really upset on my behalf? How amazing for other people to prophecy too! What’s the threat?” Because where there’s no ego, there is no threat.

This theme of ego arises in Megillat Esther too. Haman insists that everyone prostrate themselves before him, literally making more space for his presence in the universe. And when Mordechai refuses to bow, Haman becomes obsessed with the one man who won’t respect him. As Haman gains political power, his irritation towards Mordechai swells. He tells his family and friends:

“What is more,” said Haman, “Queen Esther gave a feast, and besides the king she did not have anyone but me. And tomorrow too I am invited by her along with the king. Yet all this means nothing to me every time I see that Jew Mordecai sitting in the palace gate” (Esther 5:12-13).

Haman himself recognizes the triviality of this issue: while he should be flattered and honored by his exclusive invitation to Queen Esther’s private party, he is instead overtaken by rage in the face of the one Jew who refuses to show him respect. Mordechai, on the other hand, is willing to accept an imperfect approval rating, describing himself at the end of the Megillah as accepted by most of his brethren, not all. The last pasuk of the megillah reads:

For Mordecai the Jew ranked next to King Achashverosh and was highly regarded by the Jews and popular with the multitude of his brethren; he sought the good of his people and interceded for the welfare of all his kindred (Esther 10:3).

While Mordechai subtly admits that he never did gain 100% popularity, that doesn’t stop him from devoting himself to interceding on behalf of all his fellow Jews, a feat that’s easier to accomplish when one doesn’t take oneself too seriously.

Like Moshe, Aharon, and Mordechai, let us let go of our egos, give fearlessly of ourselves, and lavish “garments of glory” upon those closest to us even as they remind us of our vulnerabilities.

“

***... let us let go of our egos,
give fearlessly of ourselves,
and lavish “garments of glory”
upon those closest to us even
as they remind us of our
vulnerabilities.***

Rabbanit Yael Smoocha

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Gloria Levenfus z”l

The Rebellious Listener and the Unicorn



Rabba Adina Roth

Class of '24

In Parshat Ki Tisa, we encounter one of the most significant lessons of leadership in the Torah. The lesson appears in an interchange between Yehoshua and Moshe, so subtly that one might actually miss it. The exchange is about listening and how the ways in which we listen can influence the destiny of those being heard.

Moshe has just been told by God that Yisrael has sinned by crafting and worshipping a golden calf. As he and Yehoshua return to the camp, they hear the voice of the people, and Yehoshua pronounces “a sound of war in the camp.”

Moshe responds in three sentences, characterised by Robert Alter as triadic verse:

***“Not the sound of crying out in triumph,
And not the sound of crying out in defeat,
I hear the sound of voices” (Shemot 32:18).***

Where Yehoshua hears something definite, Moshe’s rhythmic poetry is punctuated by indefinites. The double use of the word “ayn,” “this is not,” reinforces a sense of absence and opacity. “This sound is not victory... nor is this sound defeat,” Moshe asserts. In his disavowing the two possible outcomes of war, Moshe also refuses dichotomous thinking. Even though God has already told him what the people have done, Moshe rebels against this possibility and refuses to hear a sealed fate in the voices of the people.

In a fascinating elaboration of this dialogue between Moshe and Yehoshua in the Yerushalmi, Ta’anit 4:5, we uncover that Moshe was surprised

at the manner in which Joshua jumped to conclusions: “a man who in the future will rule over 600,000 does not know to distinguish between sound and sound!”

Moshe’s response in Ta’anit indicates that a certain quality of listening is essential for leadership. According to this interpretation, Moshe is worried that Yehoshua does not distinguish between “kol” and “kol.” The beauty of this aggadeta is that the word “kol” is identical. To distinguish between the seeming sameness of “kol” and “kol” requires a capacity for subtle, deep listening; a listening that resists expectations.

The radical gesture of Moshe’s listening and leadership is that Hashem had already told him what was going on in the camp. Yet Moshe challenges his own prior knowledge and assumptions and enters the space of kol anot! Translators have struggled to translate the word anot in the third line: what was it that Moshe heard? The JPS translates it as “singing” while Robert Alter translates it as “crying” and Artscroll translates it as “distress.” This third “anot” in Moshe’s chant is characterized by indeterminacy. In contrast to the first two “anot” that are attached to fixed descriptors, the third one remains hanging.

Rashi picks up on the indeterminacy and invites a play on words; the anot of the people was me’anin et hanefesh, a sound that tormented the soul. Neither victory nor defeat, according to Rashi’s empathic reading, the sound was fraught, a kind of soul torment.

For those few moments, when Moshe is still descending the mountain, he listens with the leadership of wholehearted indeterminacy. It is easier to jump to fixed notions of what we know about people, but in order to hold infinite possibility in mind for a person, or a people, one needs to listen

with the patience of uncertainty. Rainer Maria Rilke writes in his Sonnets to Orpheus about the unicorn, “they fed him not with corn, but only with the possibility of being.” As long as Moshe is filled with this openness to sound, where multiple interpretations hover, the Jewish people are still, like Rilke’s unicorn, in the realm of being and becoming. We too are offered a space where we might still become whomever we were born to be.

Just a few minutes later, Moshe arrives and moves from hearing to seeing. The space of radical possibility is over, and Moshe smashes the luchot. The completion of his time with Hashem is undone, and a new story needs to be written from the dust of the luchot that lie at his feet.

In a continuation of the discussion in the Yerushalmi, Rabbi Yesa says, “There is no generation in which there is not an ounce of the sin of the calf.” In Rabbi Yesa’s reading, the sin of the calf becomes part of who we are. We are always close to the possibility of sinking into idol worship, of committing grave errors. However, Moshe’s rebellious act of listening accompanies and even counters Rabbi Yesa’s pronouncement. The possibility of the egel is inscribed in each generation. However, Moshe’s “kol anot” gives us the gift of alternate pathways and indeterminate outcomes in every generation too, alongside the spectre of the egel.

In Moshe’s listening to our “kol anot” and being surprised at Yehoshua’s listening skills, Moshe teaches us something about leadership and relationships. If we listen differently, we don’t just hear possibilities; we actually help to create them. In listening differently, we open up a range of potentials in our spouse, our friend, our community, our world. In listening rebelliously, openly, against the grain, we save a space where we can write a new set of luchot and start again.

“

**If we
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to create them.**

Rabba Adina Roth

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וועלוועל משה בן רפאל

The Beginning of Jewish Culture



Rabbi Rebecca Blady

Class of '19

Parshat Vayakhel is, ostensibly, about the construction of the Mishkan, the famous wandering Israelite desert tabernacle.

However, the building that goes on here is not just about constructing a physical edifice. It's also about building a radical, counter-cultural way of living—the holy way of Jewish life.

Before launching into the nitty-gritty of Tabernacle construction, Parshat Vayakhel opens with a specific command delivered by Moshe directly to the people concerning behavior on Shabbos:

Moshe then convened the whole Israelite community and said to them: These are the things that Hashem has commanded you to do: On six days work may be done, but on the seventh day you shall have a Sabbath of complete rest, holy to Hashem; whoever does any work on it shall be put to death. You shall kindle no fire throughout your settlements on the Sabbath day (Shemot 35:1-3).

It seems strange that the parsha, which devotes itself to an entirely different subject, opens with a principle about Shabbat. What does Shabbat have to do with the Mishkan? Why single out just one prohibited act: the kindling of fire? And what is the connection between the death penalty, invoked here for violating Shabbat, and the Mishkan?

The rabbis of the Gemara, in Masechet Yevamot, devote a great deal of thought and argument to the concept of kindling fire, particularly as it is mentioned in this pasuk. One of the more interesting questions that emerges from a complex, lengthy debate over this mitzvah is: What does “lo

tava'iru aish” really mean? Is it about the simple lighting of a fire? Or, given that the verse follows a warning of tragic punishment for breaking Shabbat, perhaps the Torah means to use this phrase as a reference to one of the four infamous court-sanctioned death penalties: death by fire? And if we are speaking of the latter, can we possibly say that the death penalty overrides Shabbat?

We learn in the Gemara that if we have two conflicting Torah obligations occurring simultaneously, a positive mitzvah overrides a negative mitzvah. In our case (Yevamot 6b-7a), we have two conflicting Torah obligations: one is a positive commandment to impose the death penalty on one who breaks Shabbat. The second is a negative commandment not to kindle a fire on Shabbat, which, in the minds of several of the rabbis, represents administering any form of death penalty on Shabbat at all. If we apply the concept of privileging the positive mitzvah, we would end up administering the death penalty (the positive mitzvah) on Shabbat rather than following the rule not to break Shabbat with fire (the negative mitzvah). However, despite this clear logic, the rabbis spend nearly two amudim (pages) debating this idea. The discussion concludes without a clear solution to the problem.

Clearly, there is great hesitation among the rabbis to allow death—particularly human-sanctioned death—on Shabbat. It seems that this hesitation stems from a deeply held belief that Shabbat represents the genesis of a new culture. The culture of Shabbat holds life in the highest regard, so much so that even a death that might come from a Torah obligation is prohibited.

But Moshe goes even farther to confirm this belief in the sanctity of life, despite all the contradiction it might entail. As the Mishkan takes shape, Moshe's language teems with life-building references. As men and women work together to create the

beautiful materials for the Mishkan, memories of Bereishit come to mind. The walls of the Mishkan are named tzela, “side,” the same word used to describe Hashem’s construction of Chava from the tzela, “rib,” of Adam. Men and women alike are described in the words nadav lev, with generosity of spirit, equally contributing their efforts and materials to the Mishkan. This seems to be an actualization of Hashem’s original intention for Adam and Chava to act as echad basar, one flesh, except that this time, rather than Hashem instructing the people, the people take initiative to do this work on their own. Quite literally, the building of the Mishkan represents a creation of ritual life as well as an explicit call by Moshe to sanctify human life.

This parsha marks a paradigm shift in the Torah. Human beings, members of the Jewish people, have officially taken Hashem’s commandments into their own hands and have begun to create Jewish culture. During the week, Jewish people may “kindle fire,” with all that it entails. We may have an assortment of priorities. We may pursue a just society (via the death penalty), use technology (that requires the lighting of wicks), create materials (using heat), and attach value to them. On Shabbat, Jewish people are prohibited from kindling fire. We must dwell in the world as it is, without affecting it, holding onto the value of only one thing: life. Life is Hashem’s creation, the thing that Hashem calls “very good” right before retreating in satisfaction from creating.

This is the Shabbat that Hashem has gifted us; this is the culture of Shabbat that Moshe has instructed us to keep.

“

**Life is Hashem’s creation,
the thing that Hashem calls
“very good” right before
retreating in satisfaction
from creating.**

Rabbi Rebecca Blady

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The Art of Teaching



Rabbanit Aliza Sperling

Beit Midrash Program Faculty
Class of '19

By the end of the Book of Shemot, Bnei Yisrael have created a beautiful sanctuary for God. They are led in this endeavor by, among others, Betzalel and Oholiav, master craftsmen who are described as adept at carving, designing, and embroidering, and who are able to shape the donations given by the people into objects of beauty. Earlier (Shemot 35:34), Betzalel and Oholiav are described as having another important talent: not only are they able to perform beautiful work, but they are also able to teach others their craft. Several commentators note that many wise individuals can create but can't teach, but Betzalel and Oholiav were blessed with the ability to effectively transmit their wisdom to others.

Why is it so important for the Torah to tell us about this teaching ability of Betzalel and Oholiav? Perhaps it is because the act of teaching is a form of artistry and craftsmanship. Both the teacher and the artist must understand abstract concepts and translate them into new forms. Or perhaps it is because Betzalel and Oholiav's teachings allow them to experience firsthand what it means to be a vessel: the words and ideas flow through them to those who need to hear them. As they craft the holy objects of the Mishkan, they need to keep this lesson in mind: the Mishkan objects are also vessels, meant to carry meaning but not themselves the source of meaning. As beautiful as the objects in the Mishkan are, their true function is to serve as vessels to connect others to Hashem and bring more holiness to the world.

The 18th-century Moroccan commentator Or HaChayim takes a different perspective, focusing

on the generosity associated with teaching and sharing one's wisdom. Betzalel and Oholiav do not selfishly guard their secrets in order to maintain their own prestige; rather, they teach and train anyone who wishes to learn. Or HaChayim contrasts Betzalel and Oholiav's generous behavior with several families described in Tractate Yoma who zealously guard their trade secrets in their work for the Temple later on.

The Mishna in Yoma 38a condemns the families who would not disclose their secret methods of Temple service:

And these were mentioned to their shame: They of the house of Garmu would not teach anything about the preparation of the showbread; they of the house of Avtinas would not teach anything about the preparation of the incense; Hygros, son of Levi knew a cadence in song but would not teach it; Ben Kamzar would not teach anyone his art of writing. Concerning the former (in the previous Mishna) it is said: The memory of the righteous shall be for a blessing; concerning the others it is said: But the name of the wicked shall rot.

The Mishna clearly faults these families for not teaching others their methods; it seems to understand their behavior as selfish. The accompanying Gemara, however, and a parallel sugya in Shir Hashirim Rabbah (3:6), suggest that the behavior of these families is more complicated than it first appears. When asked why they did not share their wisdom with others, members of the Houses of Garmu and Avtinas answered that they had a tradition that the Temple would be destroyed, and they were concerned that if they would teach others their secrets, their special methods of baking and incense preparation would be used for idol worship after the destruction of the Temple. In

addition, these families went to great lengths to make sure that there would not even be the appearance of improper use of their methods for their own honor. The House of Garmu, bread bakers for the Temple, would never eat refined bread of fine flour and would only eat bread made of coarse flour mixed with bran so that people would not say that they sustained themselves from the techniques they used from the production of the Temple bread. The craftsmen of the House of Avtinas, who prepared incense for the Temple, never allowed the women in the family to wear perfume so that no one would say that they used the incense to perfume themselves. This does not seem to be the behavior of families who are only interested in their own wealth and prestige.

The Gemara's elaboration of the positions of Beit Garmu and Beit Avtinas complicates the black-and-white picture painted in the Mishna. It seems that these families were not necessarily motivated by selfishness or a desire for honor; instead, they had real fears of what would happen if they taught others their crafts. Their refusal to teach was born out of fear that their students would misuse the knowledge they would give them. This fear of others might also have led them to their extra stringencies of not eating white bread or using perfume: they were afraid of being misperceived by others.

The members of Beit Garmu and Beit Avtinas were so motivated by fear that they ignored the benefits that could come from sharing their wisdom with others. It felt safer to them to keep the knowledge inside of their small group instead of considering the possible positive impacts that their teaching could have upon individuals outside of their clan. This is an understandable position, but also a stifling one. The fear is so great that it denies other people opportunities for their own growth and learning.

In our parsha, Betzalel and Oholiav, in contrast to the Houses of Garmu and Avtinas, show generosity and courage. They teach and empower others to build the Mishkan, believing in the power of sharing

their wisdom with others just as others had presumably shared their wisdom with them. Perhaps, unlike the families of Garmu and Avtinas, they are not concerned that the people will misuse this knowledge because they know that teaching is not mere conveyance of subject material. It involves the creation of a relationship between teacher and student, a give and take where both parties are impacted. In such a relationship, the student is no longer a person to be feared; rather s/he is a partner in building a better world.

It can be scary to teach. There is no guarantee that the ideas that mean so much to the teacher will be meaningful to the student and no horoscope as to whether the student will misinterpret or misuse those ideas. Betzalel and Oholiav's courageous decision l'horot, to teach and share their wisdom, as opposed to the models of Beit Garmu and Beit Avtinas, can be a model for all of us who attempt to teach even as we are vulnerable and uncertain yet dedicated to being a vessel for the One Above.

“

**... the act of teaching is
a form of artistry and
craftsmanship.**

Rabbanit Aliza Sperling

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Ann and Jeremy Pava, who have brought light to the contributions of Orthodox women and stood behind their leadership with generosity and conviction, and in honor of Rabba Sara and the Maharat community, whose learning and leadership carry that light forward.

May this sefer be a source of inspiration for all.

When Words Aren't Enough



Ariel Wolgel

Class of '26

What can we say when sorry just isn't enough? How might we proceed when we cannot find the words to move through unspeakable experiences? What does repair look like after causing, witnessing, or failing to prevent irreparable harm?

Sometimes complicated moments call on us to communicate through non-verbal means. When words aren't available or adequate, a thoughtful gesture or intentional gift can nurture closeness, connection, and sometimes can even make space for repair.

The Book of Vayikra calls on us to come close (l'karev) to Hashem through a protocol of ritual offerings, or korbanot. Occasions for these offerings correspond to different life scenarios, ranging from admitting mistakes or intentional wrongdoing to expressing gratitude in moments of wholeness and peace. While the prescriptions for how to bring these offerings differ, they all have a shared purpose: coming close to Hashem.

God introduces the protocol for ritual offerings to Moshe with the following words: "Adam ki yakriv mikem korban la'hashem"—"When a person (adam) among you brings an offering for Hashem" (Vayikra 1:2).

The Midrash Tanchuma points out that the word for person used in this context is adam, which alludes to the first human, Adam HaRishon, who brought sin into the world. Before Adam ate the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge, restoration was irrelevant. The short-lived paradise of Eden did not

include the ability to push limits, make mistakes, or sin—and thus it also did not require repentance or repair. Ever since this first experience of sin, God and humans both have been working to figure out how to move from rupture to reconstruction, from regret to accountability, and from despair to hope.

The Shelah HaKadosh (R. Yeshayahu Horowitz, 1555-1630) extends this further and says that the whole book of Vayikra can be understood as a tikkun adam, a rehabilitation of Adam and all of humankind. Through the physical medium of a korban, people can establish a closer relationship with God in the spiritual world. In this way, a korban is similar to a thoughtful gesture meant to nurture closeness in a relationship, like making a warm cup of coffee for a loved one, bringing soup to a friend who is ill, or shoveling a neighbor's driveway. The invisible generosity of spirit becomes visible through these physical acts.

Similarly, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks quotes the Alter Rebbe, R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi (1745-1812), saying:

The essence of sacrifice is that we offer ourselves. We bring to God our faculties, our energies, our thoughts and emotions. The physical form of sacrifice—an animal offered on the altar—is only an external manifestation of an inner act. The real sacrifice is mikem, "of you." We give God something of ourselves.

With the proper intention, thoughtful gestures have the potential to communicate a depth of relationship that is beyond words. However, when the intention is absent or misguided, even the most valuable of gestures can be counterproductive, potentially increasing the distance in a relationship. On this note, the Shelah clarifies that an offering that is empty of proper intention will not achieve the end goal of increased closeness with God.

This is particularly relevant with an offering intended to support teshuva or repair in the aftermath of sin. In this scenario, the Shelah explains that rehabilitation can only happen if a person is humble in body and soul, and deeply aware of the consequences of their actions. “Adam ki yakriv mikem” only when a person brings a korban from deep within themselves is it effective. Only then is it considered truly la’Shem.

While we no longer offer korbanot in the classical sense, I believe there is relevant wisdom here for the moments of rupture in our own modern lives. In a world that is so focused on communicating through words—texting, social media, and podcasts—it can be disorienting when we can’t express ourselves verbally. Yet it is incredibly common to find our verbal expression limited in moments of trauma or stress, and it is precisely at these moments when we need closeness and relationship the most. In situations where words are limited, non-verbal expressions such as art, music, and movement can bridge the gap, helping us inch closer to connection even in the most difficult of circumstances.

Understanding Sefer Vaykira as a tikkun adam—a rehabilitation protocol for humankind—offers a deep insight into how we might live in a fragile world filled with human error, wrongdoing, and harm. In the aftermath of unspeakable events, we can gently nurture spiritual healing through appropriate and well-intentioned actions, donating our time or resources to chesed organizations or showing up for someone in need. When we find ourselves in situations where words are not enough, we can lean into the deep wisdom of korbanot, physical offerings of self that help increase goodness and Godliness in the world.

“

**...thoughtful gestures
have the potential to
communicate a depth of
relationship that is
beyond words.**

Ariel Wolgel

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Tzav

What Does It Mean to Be Free?



Chanchkie Slavin

Class of '26

We often talk about freedom, celebrate it, and even dedicate a whole festival to it. But what does it mean? When we read Parshat Tzav, we also commemorate Shabbat Hagadol, that great Shabbat before the Jews left Egypt.

Hashem's sweeping miraculous actions in the Pesach story seem far removed from our experiences today even as we relive them through the seder each year. As we read this parsha, I wonder what it was like to live in the generation of the Exodus. We know the end of the story, and so can retell it with joy. But what about the people who lived through it?

Shemot 12:21 states "Moshe then summoned all the elders of Yisrael and said to them, 'Go, pick out lambs for your families, and slaughter the passover offering.'"

Our sages tell us that the Jewish people took a lamb—a deity in the eyes of their Egyptian captors—and brought it into their homes in broad daylight, tying it to their bedposts for a few days, in preparation for the Pesach sacrifice they would offer the following week. Their captors, enraged at the treatment of their holy sheep, demanded an explanation. The Jewish people told them the truth of their intentions and their belief that they were about to be freed. This radical act led to civil war amongst the Egyptians and precipitated the final Exodus (See Tur, Orach Chaim 330:1).

There were many miracles that weekend, but we might posit that the biggest one is that the Jewish people, downtrodden for over 200 years, slaves to their masters, actually went through with tying the lamb to their bedposts. When asked what they were doing, they didn't deny it, or try to find an appeasing explanation but told their masters outright who they answered to and what their plans were.

What does it take to be free? Rabbi Tsadok of Lublin teaches that there are two kinds of freedom. In one, people are taken out of darkness into a place of light, and in the other, people bring light into the darkness. The first step of the Exodus was executed not by God's mighty hand but by the callused, unsure hands of the Jewish people, shaking with fear as they led their lambs into their homes. To be free is to defy what you are told to believe, even if everyone around you believes it. It is to walk proudly and publicly with God, your outsides reflecting your insides; it is to live echad ba'peh v'echad ba'lev, with your true essence being expressed in the way that you live your life. Slavery is to be subjected to the will of another mortal being; freedom is to be the master of your own. It is to live unafraid, with pride for who you are, not shying away when challenged. Like our ancestors of that first redemption, one small shaky step in that direction might be enough to lead us to the true redemption, where we are taken completely out of darkness into the ultimate light.

“

**To be free is to defy what
you are told to believe,
even if everyone around
you believes it.**

Chanchkie Slavin

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Between a Strange Fire and Proper Halakha



Rabbanit Avital Engelberg

Director of Maharat
BaAretz and Tehila
Class of '15

Shemini is largely known for the story of the sin of Nadav and Avihu, Aharon's sons, who brought a "strange fire" on the altar the day the Mishkan was dedicated, and were killed for it. This Torah portion deals with the minutiae of the holy work. There is one moment, in spite of Moshe's precise instructions, when Nadav and Avihu bring a "strange fire" and are punished for it. The portion continues with a desire to get back to "normal life." This includes careful details from Moshe on how to proceed with the Tabernacle's dedication and detailed instructions regarding the way things should be done.

In Chapter 10 verse 16, another event occurs, which could end up as Aharon's sons' second sin:

Moshe gives clear instructions about how to proceed with the worship in the Tabernacle and the Kohanim's consumption of the chatat offering. Yet Aharon and his remaining sons don't eat the offering but, rather, burn it, which angers Moshe:

And Moshe diligently inquired for the goat of the sin-offering, and, behold, it was burnt; and he was angry with Eleazar and with Ithamar, the sons of Aharon that were left...

Following Nadav and Avihu's transgression, Moshe wants the rest of the dedication to go peacefully. Therefore, he is upset with Aharon's sons who seem to repeat the same mistake, and do what they were not commanded to do.

However in this case, and contradictory to Nadav and Avihu's sin, Aharon responds, saying:

And Aharon spoke unto Moshe: "Behold, this day have they offered their sin-offering and their burnt-offering before the Lord, and there have befallen me such things as these; and if I had eaten the sin-offering to-day, would it have been well-pleasing in the sight of the Lord?" (Vayikra 10:19).

Aharon explains why they acted contrary to the clear command they received from Moshe. What is Aharon's explanation? Various commentators, Rashi among them, explain it as a halakhic dispute between Moshe and Aharon concerning whether it's permissible for Aharon to eat the chatat offering in the state of "onan" (halakhic status during the first day of a death of a relative, before the burial). Moshe claims that the preparations need to continue in spite of the recent deaths while Aharon claims that the chatat offering of Rosh Chodesh, which is in dispute, should not be eaten as usual, stating, therefore, that Moshe is wrong.

Other commentators explain the debate between Moshe and Aharon not as a halakhic discourse, but as one that reflects Aharon's deep sorrow. Nechama Lebovitz writes, "One who reads these verses as they were spoken, will not see in them a simple halakhic back and forth... but rather, a justification, uttered out of his innermost feelings on that bitter day... for while Aharon accepted the special restriction (not to mourn) and the judgment, he was not commanded not demanded to be filled with joy. Therefore, his heart told him that he does not need to force himself in consuming the chatat offering... a symbol of the pure thought of the one bringing it and offering it. Therefore, he knew he should not be eating the offering which should be done with great joy."

Whether this is a halakhic or emotional debate, Moshe accepts Aharon's words:

And when Moshe heard that, it was well-pleasing in his sight.

Everything calmed down. There was a halakhic debate. Moshe was convinced. No one was hurt.

But this is a debate after the act. And when we consider it closely, we see two incidences during which—as part of the dedication of the Mishkan, and amongst exact instructions given by Moshe—something is done by the kohanim contrary to what Moshe commanded them:

Maybe we can even say that Nadav and Avihu made a mistake. Rashbam explains that even though on all other days it was written that Aharon's sons placed the fire on the altar, that day, it was not commanded nor did Moshe want it. For they were waiting for a heavenly fire, so it was not good to bring a "strange fire" because the whole purpose was to sanctify heaven's name "so all will know that the fire did come from the Heaven..." Namely, Rashbam explains that what Nadav and Avihu did would have been right at any time except during the specific time of the dedication. They did not act contrary to instructions but perhaps did not comprehend the difference between the day of the dedication and any other time.

On the other hand, the second act is no mistake. Moshe spells out the law clearly, saying they must eat the chatat offering, yet Aharon and his sons act in contradiction to the command. Nonetheless, the first time ends tragically with Aharon silent, unlike the second time when Aharon argues with Moshe and Moshe acquiesces. Hashem also seems to accept Aharon's opinion since there is no tragic ending.

Why was Nadav and Avihu's "strange fire" etched into our awareness as a warning as opposed to the chatat case? The simple answer is that in the

second case, Aharon knew the law and understood that Moshe was wrong. But there is a deeper question here. Aharon ruled on a halakha contrary to Moshe. Aharon experienced conflicting values (the commandment to eat chatat as opposed to how to behave as an "onan" or, alternatively, difficulty fulfilling the mitzvah of chatat while mourning a close relative) and is acting—and ruling—accordingly.

Even though his family was just impacted, Aharon does not give up his need for freedom. Immediately after the tragedy, he seemingly takes a risk again, doing things "not according to the precise instructions." But this time he advocates for his actions, explaining his halakhic thought process to Moshe. Both Moshe and God accept his words and his ruling.

Usually we learn from parshat Shemini not to deviate from the accepted written law with Nadav and Avihu's fate as our cautionary lesson. But if we keep reading and reach the second case of Aharon and his sons, we see that this parsha is much more complicated. The parsha teaches us greater sophistication: yes, one must behave by the rules, but there are situations where it's likely that, in spite of the rules, we should deviate—within the bounds of halakha—to build a better and more just law.

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The Purity in Embodied Knowledge



Rabbi Sofia Freudenstein

Class of '25

In Bava Metzia 86a, there is an unusual story about Rabba Bar Nachmani, on the run from Babylonian authorities. He runs to a swamp and sits on the stump of a palm tree, studying Torah as his life is in danger. The scene then shifts, in almost comic-book panel fashion, to a debate between God and the heavenly academy (“metivta d’rakia”) on the issue of baheret im sei’ar lavan—the issue of a snow-white leprous sore with white hair—that appears first in Parshat Tazria–Metzora. If the hair precedes the sore, the skin is deemed pure. But if the sore precedes the hair, it is deemed impure. However, what if it is unclear which precedes which? This is the debate in heaven, happening between God and a myriad of angels. Why is the obscure nature of infection the topic of divine debate?

Professor Chaim Saiman, in his book *Halakhah: The Rabbinic Idea of Law*, puts it more dramatically. He writes:

What is being argued about in this academy? The mysteries of the cosmos? The answers to life’s true meaning? The secrets that emerge when theology meets physics? Is this where God’s ultimate purpose is revealed from the divine throne itself? Not at all...Skin? Hair? Blotches!

Saiman concludes that this topic is a microcosm of what halakha is supposed to be in our lives. It is emblematic of how every aspect of our lived existence—no matter how mundane or even gross—is encompassed by Jewish law. And not only that, but, as indicated by God debating leprosy in heaven, our lived bodily experience is of utmost

importance. As the topic of focus in the highest spiritual realm, our physicality is deemed worthy of God’s speculation and care.

Let us take this idea one step further. The debate is about the default assumption when there is doubt regarding aspects of the human body. The heavenly court suggests ruling cautiously and deems the skin impure while God, more leniently, suggests that it be deemed pure. This is similar to the Oven of Akhnai debate in Bava Metzia 59b. There, Rabbi Eliezer disagrees with the rabbis about the purity of an oven. While the majority of rabbis promote caution, deeming the oven impure, Rabbi Eliezer argues for purity, getting the natural world to turn itself upside down in order to show how much his lenient ruling aligns with God’s will. Why, like Rabbi Eliezer, does God push for purity when possible?

It seems that God’s stance teaches us that when it is possible to declare purity, we should. This is also a positive assertion of embodiment. Unless we have proof otherwise, we should assume that our bodies are pure.

This is rather counterintuitive. When thinking about the gap between our physical selves and God’s incorporeality, between the sublime perfection of God and the messy physicality of this world, we might imagine that God’s rulings would be that we are impure. But these gemarot teach us to reject such assumptions. The end of the Rabba bar Nachmani story in Bava Metzia pushes this stance even more strongly. In order to resolve the debate between God and the heavenly court, Rabba bar Nachmani is needed, as he is “preeminent in [the halakhot of] leprosy [and the halakhot of ritual impurity imparted by] tents” (Bava Metzia 86a). He ascends to Heaven to determine how to adjudicate this case even though God is one of the participants! Rabba bar Nachmani is an expert

due to his knowledge but also just by virtue of his being embodied. He can offer expert testimony on physicality to the disembodied heavenly court.

A similar dynamic lifting up our bodily selves as well as bodily knowledge can be found in another realm of halakha that is also addressed in this week's parshiyot: the laws of niddah (menstrual purity). In a Mishna in Hilchot Niddah, a woman approaches Rabbi Akiva with a question regarding menstrual purity:

It happened that a woman came in front of Rabbi Akiva and said to him: I have seen a bloodstain. He said to her: Perhaps you had a wound? She said to him: Yes, but it has healed. He said to her: Perhaps it could have opened again and let out some blood. She said to him: Yes. And Rabbi Akiva declared her clean. He saw his disciples look at each other in astonishment. He said to them: Why do you find this difficult, for the sages did not say this rule in order to be stringent but rather to be lenient, for it is said, "And if a woman have issue, and her issue in her flesh be blood"—blood but not a bloodstain (Mishna Niddah 8:3).

In this story, a woman appears before Rabbi Akiva in distress, assuming that if she saw blood she must be impure (as taught in Vayikra 15). Yet, in a pastorally sensitive fashion, Rabbi Akiva asks thoughtful questions that lead to the conclusion of purity. His students are shocked by his approach, and he chastises them for their astonishment. Just like the debate between the heavenly court and God regarding the baheret im sei'ar lavan, in which God assumes purity when there is doubt, here Rabbi Akiva does the same. The body is pure unless there is clear proof otherwise. Not only that, but Rabbi Akiva does not question or reject the woman's seeming concern of impurity. He instead asks her intuitive questions to get closer to the answer. Like Rabba bar Nachmani being needed for his embodied self to discern the status of leprosy, the woman is needed

for her embodied self to discern the status of menstrual purity.

These parshiyot of Tazria-Metzora remind us to check in with our bodily selves, noticing the surface of our bodies as well as our intricate insides. Verse after verse, we read about aspects of our lived experiences that I would have never assumed the Torah would want to highlight—and yet are holy enough to be the subject of heavenly debate and anchors of halakhic leniency. As the midrash in Vayikra Rabbah says:

Rabbi Shmuel bar Yitzhak interprets: Even though they appear as though they are too ugly and black to recite them in public, e.g., the halakhot of discharges, leprosy, a menstruating woman, and a woman who has given birth, the Holy One blessed be He said: "They are pleasant to Me" (Vayikra Rabbah 19:3).

God finds our bodily ways desirable. They can be wellsprings of intuition and factors in the way we determine what is true in the world. By having divine ink spilled on bodily discharges and skin abnormalities, these parshiyot of Tazria-Metzora show us how we are meant to be in this world with our whole selves and that our whole selves merit discussion and compassion, both divine and human.

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Metzora

Metzora and Mashiach



**Rabba Melissa
Scholten-Gutierrez**

Class of '18

The wounded healer is a paradigm that suggests that a healer's own wounds can carry curative power for those with whom they work. This is true of therapists, clergy members, and, I would suggest, people at large. We all have wounds and the opportunity to heal others from them.

The Talmud Bavli in Sanhedrin 98a brings a story of Mashiach interfacing with this very idea.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said to Eliyahu: When will the Messiah come? Eliyahu said to him: Go ask him. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi asked: And where is he sitting? Eliyahu said to him: At the entrance of the city of Rome. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi asked him: And what is his identifying sign by means of which I can recognize him? Eliyahu answered: He sits among the poor who suffer from illnesses. And all of them untie their bandages and tie them all at once, but the Messiah unties one bandage and ties one at a time. He says: Perhaps I will be needed to serve to bring about the redemption. Therefore, I will never tie more than one bandage, so that I will not be delayed.

Mashiach places himself amidst the others who are also suffering. He uses his wounds to hold his space there and to provide comfort to those who are suffering outside the city.

In Parshat Tazria-Metzora, we learn a lot about how to interact with those who are suffering outside of their community, chutz l'machaneh. While our

parsha speaks primarily of those who have been afflicted with tzara'at, a condition for which there is no modern translation, it also includes women who are post-childbirth and men who have had a seminal emission, which are quite present in our modern lives.

Someone with presumed tzara'at must go to a priest and have it examined and declared publicly. They are then sent out of the camp for seven days, as we read in Vayikra 13:46:

He shall be unclean as long as the disease is on him. Being unclean, he shall dwell apart; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.

After being checked and found clean, they must bring a complex series of offerings and engage in a purifying ritual, the completion of which allows them to re-enter the community.

Tzara'at is most commonly translated as leprosy. While we know it's not quite leprosy, we also know that it was a condition that caused people to be shunned from their community in part because of presumed contagion and fear, the same thing stigma which applies to "lepers" today. So, who are our modern lepers? Who are the people we cast out from our society because of stigma and fear?

One such group is those with mental illness. To take the connection one step further, Chazal often question the causes of tzara'at, seeking a moral or spiritual failing to pin it on. Our communities often do the same with mental illness. Not only are people with mental illness often quieted, shunned, or feared, but they are judged as others try to understand what failing has caused their affliction. We blame the victim and separate from them at a time when they need the most support.

In order to receive adequate support, those with mental illness must approach a professional, be examined, and have a diagnosis declared. Sometimes, that person must go physically from the community in order to heal in a treatment center.

Other times, that person remains physically in the community but feels isolated and removed emotionally.

We must do better than our ancestors. We cannot shun those whom we do not understand. We must find ways to keep people connected to our community even when they must physically separate in order to heal. We cannot use their illness against them or as an excuse to dissociate.

Rabbi Sara Berman suggests that the "ritual associated with purification [from tzara'at] can be viewed as a way to give people time to heal. People in the midst of severe clinical depression or any other mental illness should have a chance to separate from their responsibilities in order to focus solely on getting better. Once they begin to heal, they can slowly reintegrate into society and their normal activities. As they do this, they should be welcomed and celebrated by the community rather than avoided."

Mashiach can only come once we act like Mashiach and start helping the people in our midst, embracing our role as wounded healers.

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Achrei Mot-Kedoshim

Great Principles of Torah



Rabbi Jeffrey Fox

Rosh HaYeshiva
and Dean of Faculty

“**Y**ou shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Vayikra 19:18) presents us with a core principle of the Torah. The Yerushalmi in Nedarim 43c quotes a fundamental debate about the nature of Jewish life. Rabbi Akiva claims that loving your neighbor is the “great principle of the Torah.” On the other hand, Ben Azzai quotes from Bereishit (5:1): “This is the book of the generations of Adam, on the day that God created Adam, in the image of God He made Adam,” as the “great principle of the Torah.”

Rabbi Yitz Greenberg has been teaching this debate as an opening to the nature of Judaism for many years. What lies at the center of Jewish life? For Ben Azzai, the Torah’s core teaching is that we are each created in the image of God. In order to begin with the image of God, we have to place God at the center and move human beings to the perimeter. Rabbi Akiva, on the other hand, places the human being at the center in terms of the “great principle of the Torah.” Is Judaism a theocentric religion or an anthropocentric religion?

To be clear, both Ben Azzai and Rabbi Akiva understand that the opposing value is also extraordinarily important. It is not the case that Rabbi Akiva is pushing God out of the equation, nor is Ben Azzai pushing human beings away. Rather, if they were forced to make a choice between two core values, Ben Azzai would put God at the top of the list and Rabbi Akiva would put humanity on the top of the list.

This same dialectic appears in Rashi's reading of the potential convert who came to Shammai and Hillel (Bavli, Shabbat, 31a) and asked to learn Torah on one foot. Shammai pushes away the potential convert with a measuring stick in his hand. The gemara then says:

The non-Jew came before Hillel and Hillel converted him saying, "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the entire Torah, the rest is commentary, now go and study."

If we take this short passage at face value, Hillel appears to have converted this non-Jew and only afterwards entered into an educational process. The same process appears to be the case with all three potential converts who come to Shammai and Hillel. Perhaps this is the case because Hillel was the greatest Jewish educator of all time, and he had confidence in his own ability to bring this person along the journey.

Hillel's formulation of the central principle of the Torah, the elevator pitch of Judaism, is different from both Ben Azzai and Rabbi Akiva. Though Hillel seems to place human beings at the center, he does so with a negative formulation. The Torah, in Parshat Achrei Mot, says that we must love our fellow as ourselves. Hillel pushes us to look inside first. Religious life starts with my own experience, according to Hillel: "that which is hateful to you..."

Rashi, commenting on Hillel's aphorism, offers two competing readings of the word "your fellow," "I'reyecha." The second opinion that he quotes is in line with Rabbi Akiva:

Another understanding: Your friend literally. Such as robbery, burglary and most of the mitzvos.

This is the understanding that most people associate with "your fellow." However, the first read that Rashi offers of the word is very different.

"Do not abandon your Friend and your father's Friend" (Proverbs 27)—this is the Holy blessed One. Do not violate God's words, for it would be hateful to you if your friend would violate your words.

This read imagines that "your fellow" actually refers to God. Rashi has brought Ben Azzai's theocentric worldview to Hillel's conversation with the convert. According to this approach, we must ask what God might want and what is demanded of us by the halakha.

Different ideas of what Hillel might have meant when he was speaking to these potential converts present us with fertile ground to understand what each of us imagines to be the core of Jewish religious life. The opportunity to work with potential converts is both a great responsibility and wonderful gift. The passage in Masechet Shabbat concludes:

"Eventually the three [converts] happened to meet somewhere and said to each other: "Shammai's strictness would have killed us. Hillel's humility brought us under the wings of the divine presence."

In a fascinating combination, Rashi's two interpretations bring together both Ben Azzai and Rabbi Akiva. Is Judaism theocentric or anthropocentric? Rashi says yes to both!

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Dorothy Fox

IN HONOR OF
my son, Jeff

IN MEMORY OF
Abba, Herbert Fox z"l

Emor

Wither the Defect



Rabbanit Gloria Nusbacher

Class of '20

I have always been troubled by the pesukim in parshat Emor that exclude a Kohen who has a mum—variously translated as a blemish or a defect—from performing the Temple service. The Torah specifically lists the following among those who may not perform the Temple service on account of their mum: a Kohen who is blind or lame, who has a broken arm or leg, who has one limb longer than the other, who is a hunchback or a dwarf, who has a growth in his eye, who has certain skin conditions, or who has crushed testicles (See Vayikra 21:16–23).

To our modern sensibilities, this seems incredibly harsh. Why should a person's external features affect their ability to perform ritual acts in the Temple? Does God really care what a Kohen looks like?

It is not only contemporary society that found these provisions troubling. Discomfort with these exclusions from priestly service seems to date back to the time of the Mishna.

At the time of the Mishna, the Kohanim are no longer offering sacrifices at the Temple, and the focus of public worship has shifted to prayer. The Kohen's role is now to bless the people with birkhat Kohanim, the priestly blessing. And here, too, we find a disqualification from service on account of a mum. The Mishna states:

A Kohen who has mumim on his hands may not lift his hands [to recite birkhat Kohanim]. Rabbi Yehudah says even one whose hands are colored with satis (a blue

dye), may not lift his hands [to recite birkhat Kohanim] because the people will look at him (Talmud Bavli, Megilla 24b).

A baraita, another teaching from the time of the Mishna, describes the disqualifying defects as mumim on the Kohen's face, hands, or feet. Both the Mishna and this baraita have limited the disqualifications to those found on the visible parts of the Kohen's body. Moreover, the Mishna pairs this type of disqualification with another: a Kohen whose hands are temporarily discolored with a blue dye, which typically occurs from touching a certain type of plant. And a reason is that the people will stare at him while he is reciting the priestly blessing. The focus has shifted from something inherently "wrong" with the excluded Kohen to something that could be distracting to the congregation.

The Gemara takes this development a step further. It gives several examples of Kohanim who had particular disqualifying defects but were nevertheless permitted to recite the priestly blessing because they were familiar in the community. An example is the following story:

Rabbi Yochanan said: One who is blind in one eye may not lift his hands to recite the Priestly Benediction because people will gaze at him. The Gemara asks: Wasn't there a certain priest who was blind in one eye in the neighborhood of Rabbi Yochanan, and he would lift his hands and recite the Priestly Benediction? The Gemara answers: That priest was a familiar figure in his town, and therefore he would not attract attention during the Priestly Benediction (Talmud Bavli, Megillah 24b).

Once people were accustomed to a particular Kohen and his defects, those defects were no longer seen as distracting. As a result, the defect was no longer seen as a disqualification.

In light of this history, perhaps we can see the priestly disqualifications in Parshat Emor as reflecting a time when the sight of a Kohen with a mum would have been jarring to the people and may have even led to their viewing the priesthood with less esteem. Over time, as people became more comfortable seeing Kohanim with a particular mum, that mum ceased to be a disqualification.

Similarly, today, as we become able to imagine a wider array of people in various positions of authority, the categories of people who can (and do) occupy those positions can grow.

The Gemara's approach to Kohanim with a mum can serve as a model for how to relate to individuals with disabilities. Today, all too often, people see the disability rather than the person. We tend to stare at someone in a wheelchair or with other obvious physical conditions. If a person is accompanied by a caregiver, we may address the caregiver about the person rather than address the person directly. Although this type of conduct is not intended to offend, it often has the effect of making the person with the disability feel uncomfortable or non-existent.

The Gemara teaches us that there is a way to train ourselves to overcome these demeaning behaviors. As we increase our interactions with people who are different from us, over time those differences, including physical disabilities, will no longer be the defining feature of the person, and we will become able to see each person as his or her whole self.

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IN MEMORY OF

**Carla Crohn Friedman z"l
and Rabbi Jack Shechter z"l**

The Nature of Trust



Rabba Amy Newman

Class of '22

Parshat Behar is not our first encounter with the laws of shmitta. We've seen these before, in Sefer Shemot. There, it seemed the purpose of shmitta was to provide for poor people: "Six years shall you sow your land and gather in its yield; but in the seventh you shall let it rest and lie fallow. Let the needy among your people eat of it." The laws of shmitta appear together with the command not to oppress the stranger because we were strangers in Egypt. In Shemot, shmitta is about our relationships with people.

In our parsha, though, shmitta is different. It is about a tripartite relationship between God, God's land, and God's people. This difference makes sense: in Shemot, Bnei Yisrael become a nation, and in Vayikra, that nation learns about the relationships they are meant to have with God and with each other. During shmitta, we are to forgive debts and release servants as affirmation that our enduring identity is as avdei Hashem, and any other statuses we've acquired since the last shmitta—debtor, creditor, servant, master—are fleeting and do not define us. We are to give the land a complete rest and return all pieces of land to their original holders as affirmation that the land belongs to God.

God knew that the people would worry about how they would survive without working the land and promised that their crops in the sixth year would be abundant enough to sustain them. But even with this promise, Bnei Yisrael would need to summon enormous trust in God to fulfill the mitzvot of shmitta. In Vayikra, the people were still adjusting to life as servants of God, who takes care of the people and provides what they need. The memory

of being slaves to Pharaoh, who cut off their supply of straw while demanding that they still produce the same quota of bricks, is still fresh. The shmitta year is an exercise in bitachon.

In the haftorah, from Yirmiyahu 17, the prophet addresses this bitachon: "Cursed is the man who puts his trust in man, who makes mere flesh his strength, and turns his thoughts away from God...

Blessed is the man who puts his trust in God, whose trust is God alone." Yirmiyahu describes that this cursed man will be like a parched bush in a barren desert while the blessed man will be like a tree planted by water, which can easily survive a year of drought.

Rashi offers a backstory for this curse; he says the cursed man's sin was that he violated the laws of shmitta: "he put his trust in man in his plowing and his harvest, saying, 'I will sow during the seventh year, and I will eat.'" This man doesn't believe that God will fulfill God's promise to sustain Bnei Yisrael through shmitta and beyond, so he works the land when it is forbidden. We can't know if he violated shmitta defiantly (perhaps with pride) or reluctantly (perhaps with guilt), but we know that he lacked the bitachon needed to fulfill this mitzvah. And if the cursed man's sin was violating shmitta, we can assume, then, that the blessed man trusted God and kept shmitta; like the tree that can endure a drought, he knew he could endure a year without working the land.

On a first read of Yirmiyahu's curse, it seems like this verse is about a man who puts his bitachon in another person, and we might assume that Yirmiyahu is warning against relying excessively on other people. But if we look again at Rashi, who has that man saying "I will sow during the seventh year and I will eat," it seems this man violated shmitta by working the land when he wasn't supposed to; he wasn't putting excessive trust in

another man but in his own self. He worried that God wouldn't provide enough food to sustain him in the seventh year, so he tried to solve the problem himself and earned himself this curse by being too confident in his own power.

Radak also helps us understand what appropriate bitachon looks like. For Radak, the problem with the cursed person is that he put *all* his trust in humans. It's okay—even good and necessary—for us to rely on other people. When we are in relationship with others, we trust that they, with God's help, will help us, and we likewise do our best to be trustworthy to them. Yirmiyahu's curse and blessing have parallel language, but the curse has an extra clause with no parallel in the blessing: it states that he "turns his thoughts away from God." The problem isn't just that he trusts in people but that he only trusts people, to the exclusion of God.

We learn from the Navi, and from Rashi and Radak, that we need to have bitachon in God and also the right amount of bitachon in ourselves and in others; we should trust that we, and those around us, will use our God-given gifts to do the best we can. Our own capacities are limited. Rashi's person who trusts too much in himself, and Radak's person who trusts in others to the exclusion of God, both seem to believe they are in control; they think that if they just work the land or rely on others they will have the good outcomes they are hoping for. Bitachon involves letting go of our illusion of control. We can't know how the events of our lives will unfold. We do our best, we make reasonable efforts to do right by ourselves and our communities, and we let go of our need to control the outcomes. Shmitta pushes us to let go of that illusion of control, by pausing our productivity, and reminding us that we are avdei Hashem and the land belongs to God. We stop working the land, and God provides the food we need. We let go of the statuses we've taken on, like debtor or creditor, because any power we've gained or lost is temporary.

In addition to the bitachon we strive to have, there might also be a way in which God has bitachon in

us. God knows that the people will worry about not having enough to eat in the seventh year, and God promises to provide extra in the sixth year, before shmiitta. Bnei Yisrael haven't yet had the chance to show God that they will fulfill the mitzvah and let the land rest, but God seems to trust that they will and promises extra food in advance of shmiitta.

God is teaching us here about the nature of trust. God demonstrates that by trusting us, we will know that we can trust God. As we try to mend our communal structures and begin to come back together, the parsha's lessons about bitachon and trustworthiness can help us forge stronger bonds with God and with each other. And if we are able to cultivate this bitachon, God assures us at the end of Parshat Behar that we will have security and peace: you shall dwell securely in your land, and I will grant peace in the land.



**God demonstrates that
by trusting us, we will know
that we can trust God.**

Rabba Amy Newman

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**Wife: Ruby; children: Michael, Kurt,
and Amy and their families; sisters:
Harriet, Molli, and Sandee and their
families; machatunim: George and
Jolan Preiss and their family**

IN LOVING MEMORY OF
Dr. Alvin Newman z"l

Bechukotai

On Theodicy



Rabba Sara Hurwitz
President and Co-Founder

The tochecha (rebuke) section in this week's double parsha is troubling for many.

If you do not listen to me, then not only will you suffer, but, the Torah goes on to explain, your land will not give its produce, pestilence will be sent and you will be delivered into the hand of your enemy (Vayikra 26:14, 20, 25).

It is for this reason that the minhag in most shuls is for the ba'al kriyah (Torah reader) to read this section quickly and quietly.

Throughout history, there have always been radical rabbinic figures who take these pesukim literally and have linked tragedy and suffering to communal sin. For example, In 1837, the Chatam Sofer gave a eulogy for the thousands who died in a tragic earthquake that devastated Tzefat. His explanation for the deaths was jealousy. At one point, an attempt to theologize and assign blame for human tragedy may have brought some consolation to a world of chaos and disorder—theodicy holds forth the promise of justice and meaning. But today, I believe that most Americans have given up trying to reconcile the existence of evil with divine power. In a post-Holocaust era, as Rabbi Yitz Greenberg teaches, linking human suffering to theodicy is almost unbearable: six million could not have perished because they “did not listen to the words of God.”

On the other hand, there is an alternative way to understand these pesukim. The Zohar held that all admonishments are actually blessings, even if on the surface they appear to be curses:

All the promises and consolation of Israel are written in these curses. Consider, when a king loves his son, although he might curse him and beat him, nevertheless he loves him from the bottom of his heart. Thus, even though the Holy One, blessed be He, uttered curses, His words were said lovingly. Outwardly they appear as curses, but they are a great beneficence, since these curses were said lovingly (Zohar Hadash, 19, Jerusalem 1995, Parashat Ki Tavo, p. 3, par. 9,10).

Therefore, according to the Hasidic masters, the tochecha verses should not be read quickly and quietly. Rather, they are belted out with tremendous emphasis. This view that the curses contain great hidden blessings led to competition in certain communities over the purchase of this aliyah to the Torah.

In Marseilles, in the Saint-Just Synagogue, which follows the customs of the Jews of Algiers, the president of the synagogue receives the aliyah of the tochecha and is escorted to the bima by spirited singing. At the end of the reading, the president blesses the congregation and returns to his seat only after having hugged and kissed everyone. His return to his seat is also accompanied by song. After services, the president gives a large kiddush for all present.

This philosophy demands us to see the world through a prism of optimism. It requires that individuals not be apathetic to the darkness that envelops our world but to work towards enhancing its many blessings; to not blindly accept the travails but work to make the world better.

Parshat Bechukotai is read during the omer, when we mourn for the tragic loss of Rabbi Akiva's 24,000 students. The classic dogma for explaining their death as described in the Talmud (Yevamot 62b)

is that the plague struck because they “did not respect one another.”

The gemara goes on to explain: “Rabbi Akiva had 12,000 pairs of students ... and all of them died in one period of time because they did not conduct themselves with respect towards one another.” They did not want to help each other in their studies. They were so internally focused that they did not notice one another.

On closer look, the Talmud does not say that 24,000 students died but rather 12,000 pairs of students died. In other words, each student learned with and cared for one other. However, the remaining 23,998 students were slighted. The real lesson of this tragedy is not in explaining why the plague came. The emphasis must be on how they could have taken responsibility for one another. Instead of asking where God was during a disaster, one could ask, “where was man?”

The notion of theodicy must be reclaimed and re-explained. Rather than teaching our children about the possible root causes for tragedy, we must emphasize how each of us can respond. We must work towards engendering compassion and responsibility rather than the condescension of those who think they know the mind of God. Bad things happen to good people. Sometimes we can’t do anything about them, and often they make no sense to us. Then again, sometimes there are things we could have done and still can do. In all cases, our response should be to have more compassion, more generosity—and, where possible, more determination to take communal responsibility.

“

**Rather than teaching
our children about the possible
root causes for tragedy,
we must emphasize how
each of us can respond.**

Rabba Sara Hurwitz

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Living the Jewish Calling



**Rabbanit Alissa
Thomas-Newborn**

Class of '16

In Sefer Bamidbar, we transition from being freed slaves who accept God's Torah to a responsible nation that has to live God's Torah. At times, we struggle greatly with the holy charge to uphold God's mitzvot and improve the world through them. This effort, which we continue to pursue today, is set into motion when we are counted in the census in Parshat Bamidbar, taking the first proactive step away from Har Sinai and toward Eretz Yisrael. It is then that we begin to carry the yoke of being a Jewish people following God.

At this moment, in the midst of counting for both Sefirat HaOmer and Parshat Bamidbar, we can focus on Aleinu, a familiar tefillah that holds us accountable. It is a tefillah that reminds us multiple times a day why God took us out of Egypt and into the desert.

We see the message epitomized in the very first word: Aleinu: "it's on **us**." Aleinu is **our** charge when we walk out of shul to be aspirational in how we live. As the Bayit Chadash teaches, Aleinu ends our davening because it strengthens our faith as we go out into the world. Just as Parshat Bamidbar moves us from Har Sinai into the desert with a vision for our land and peoplehood, Aleinu carries us out of the cocoon of prayer and into a life of purpose, action, and connection. Or, as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks puts it, through Aleinu "we hope to spread our message by leading exemplary lives...[and] we remind ourselves that our goal is not simply to pray, but to live a prayerful life."

Aleinu tells us to live with humility and gratitude, and to continually give thanks to God for who we

are and what we have. It shows us that the only way to perfect the world is through God's kingship, through practicing His Torah and mitzvot. And it obligates us to envision a more Godly world. Therefore, when we face our enemies, whether spiritual enemies like doubt, fear, and the yetzer hara or physical enemies like those who want to destroy Jews and Israel, Aleinu reminds us that we are God's people, we walk with Him, and there is something greater to aspire to. In our parsha, we can imagine Aleinu as a call to the legions of Bnei Yisrael who line up to be counted as they fight for our future. The mission of Aleinu has historically given us the strength to maintain our values and withstand internal and external threats.

But while we may agree that Aleinu is a powerful tefillah, there are some practical ways we can make it matter to us.

1. Jews chose to sanctify God's name with this prayer on their lips. Famously, the Jews in 12th-century France said the words of Aleinu and became martyrs rather than accept forced conversion. Hauntingly, they sang Aleinu as they were being burned at the stake. They did this because it was the ultimate response to their enemies, as the prayer declared unyielding faith in God and hope for His kingship even after their deaths. Today we recite/sing it with them in mind.
2. God is listening for it. The Mishna Berurah explains that when we say Aleinu, "All of the hosts of heaven listen, and God stands with His entourage from above." God needs us to show up for Him, and we need Him to have our backs as we face the ups and downs of life. Aleinu is the time when we stand with God in our commitment to each other.
3. It has a mic-drop ending that deserves more attention. The final words of Aleinu (originating in Zechariah 14:9) are, "On that day the Lord will be

One, and His name one.” The Gemara in Pesachim 50a asks, “What does ‘one’ mean? Isn’t God’s name already one?” Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak answers that the difference between this world and the world to come is that in this world God’s name is not read as it is written. And so, God’s name is not truly one. When we recite the last line of Aleinu, we acknowledge that the world is imperfect. Our loved ones die, and we miss them terribly. Many are homeless or go without food. We hurt each other, intentionally and unintentionally, with words and actions. And yet, we still have to step outside of shul and lead prayerful lives; we still have to enter the midbar, for, if we don’t, who will make God’s name one?

Aleinu challenges us to see what the world is right now and then imagine what it could be, like making a bikkur cholim visit when it is uncomfortable or inconvenient, giving above and beyond of our time to those in need, or sacrificing our own desires to provide opportunities to a loved one or even a stranger. In the words of Aleinu, we are not just asking God to bring about achdut and tikkun; we are challenging ourselves to do so. Aleinu: it’s on us!

The next time we say Aleinu, I encourage us to think of what the world is now and what it could be. Right now in our own lives, we may feel the anxiety of battles that blaze around us, against Israel, and even less overtly in our own communities. Whatever midbar we stand on the brink of, we need to hear the call of Aleinu. As a responsible and free people, we are called to live God’s Torah not just at the foot of Har Sinai but also in the desert and, God willing, on our way to Eretz Yisrael. And so, as we enter into Sefer Bamidbar and celebrate Matan Torah, let’s choose to renew our identity as the people God took us out of Egypt to become: a humble and hopeful people; a people that acknowledges pain and suffering and strives to make this world a little more like the world to come; a people that says Aleinu—it’s on us to make God’s name one—whether at Har Sinai, in the desert, or in our davening.

“

Whatever midbar we stand on the brink of, we need to hear the call of Aleinu.

Rabbanit Alissa Thomas-Newborn

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WITH GRATITUDE TO
Ann and Jeremy Pava

Who is Fit to Be a Leader?



Rabbi Briah Cahana

Class of '23

How do we uplift each other in the middle of what feels like a series of chaotic *tohu va'vohu* moments, as many of us have felt in recent years? Just last week, we celebrated the quintessential moment of receiving the Torah from God at Sinai, a scene that also recalls a type of pandemonium. In that moment, the Israelites beseeched Moshe to mediate God's thunderous and fiery revelation so that they could understand the message and not die by it (Shemot 20:16). We may ask ourselves in the modern world how to respond to these metaphorical and actual fires, recognizing how tremendously our systems have failed to help the economically, physically, and racially vulnerable in our societies. Urgent cries for justice and radical care for those in need are all the more stark when we face the depth of brokenness and lack of *shalom* in our midst.

Parshat Naso understands our human need for reassurance that those in power seek societies' collective and individual safety, well-being, and wholeness. The priestly benediction, *birkat HaKohanim*, is tucked within a parsha that describes the inauguration of the Tabernacle, on the one hand, and then details what should be done in aberrant cases, such as with the individuals who become ritually impure, Israelites who have wronged each other, a jealous husband who accuses his wife of infidelity (*isha sotah*), and the Nazirite who separates from the community. In most cases, individuals who have strayed can find ways to return to Israelite society, either through sacrificial offerings or recompense.

But what is the responsibility of the leaders to ensure that harmony is restored within the community once the offerings have been brought and the payments made? I believe that this is the function of *birkat HaKohanim*. These leaders are responsible not solely for overseeing that the rituals and services in the Temple are conducted smoothly but for turning to the people, facing the messiness of reality, and nevertheless bestowing this divine blessing of peace to uplift every soul.

The Lord spoke to Moshe:

“Speak to Aharon and his sons:

Thus shall you bless the people of Israel.

Say to them:

The Lord bless you and protect you!

The Lord deal kindly and graciously with you!

The Lord bestow His favor upon you and grant you peace!

Thus they shall link My name with the people of Israel, and I will bless them” (Bamidbar 6:22-27).

The priests were instructed to bless the people daily with these words, raising their outstretched hands as a conduit for God's light and protection. In doing so, they elevated the entire community. Rashi derives from the words “*amor lahem*,” (say unto them) that *everyone* needs to be present in order to hear the blessing. Additionally, he notices that the word “*amor*” is written in plene form, with the letter *vav* included. Rashi beautifully learns from this detail that the priests were instructed to bless

the people unhurriedly, with a full heart and deep kavanah. Furthermore, a Kohen is forbidden to have hatred in his heart toward anyone in his community when reciting this blessing; rather, he must bless with unfettered love (Mishna Berurah 128:7). What do these personal prescriptions governing birkat HaKohanim indicate to us about the relationship of the priests toward the community? And what can this teach us about what we are looking for in our own leaders?

First, the Torah is teaching us that no one can reside “outside the camp” of the Kohen’s heart when delivering the blessing. The entire community must be elevated together. In order for birkat HaKohanim to function, it is the Kohen’s responsibility to look upon all individuals that make up the collective with equal love, respect, and dignity. Second, if there is any ill will, the Kohen must work to correct his biases. His love must extend to the Nazirite who has returned to her community as well as to the jealous husband and wife who endured the shame of the bitter waters ceremony. The effect of this blessing allows for those on the periphery to reintegrate, restoring faith and a sense of unity.

There is a lot of brokenness in our systems. As cries for justice, safety, and freedom enter our homes, our sense of community and responsibility can expand. We are tied up in each other’s sufferings and liberations, and we will have to bring many offerings and make amends to build a better society. But we also must slow down, check our hearts, know the inherent value in each person, and elevate each other from a place of love and affirmation. Good and holy work emerges from there.

May we merit to have compassionate, courageous, and humble leaders who can bless all of us toward more wholeness and dignity. And may we in turn know how to elect ourselves to do the same for others.

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**As cries for justice, safety,
and freedom enter our homes,
our sense of community and
responsibility can expand.**

Rabbi Bria Cahana

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Miriam's Tzara'at: A Punishment or an Opportunity?



Rabbanit Dalia Davis

Class of '22

And Miriam and Aharon spoke regarding Moshe (Bamidbar 12:1).

Parshat Beha'alotekha concludes with Miriam afflicted by tzara'at, a consequence of speaking lashon hara about Moshe. There is a seeming injustice in this story insofar as Aharon is spared this punishment despite having participated in the conversation.

The most apparent explanation emphasizes that the verb "r'badaitav" is written in the singular feminine form, literally, "and she spoke." Rashi learns from this that Miriam initiated the conversation. Similarly, Ibn Ezra views Miriam in a more active role and Aharon as a more passive party to the exchange.

However, there is a more forgiving way to understand this passage and Miriam's affliction. What if the tzara'at was more of a gift than a punishment? Could it have been something Miriam desperately needed, however unpleasant? This would be consistent with a model of Hashem as our loving parent more than the dispenser of reward and punishment.

To explore this possibility, consider a sub-theme within the parsha, the theme of replacement. The concept of Pesach Sheini, which appears earlier in the parsha, presents one example.

"Speak unto the children of Yisrael, saying: When anyone throughout your generations shall be (ritually impure) or

on a far journey (on the eve of Pesach), they shall (nonetheless) observe Hashem's Pesach. In the second month on the fourteenth day at dusk they shall keep it; they shall eat it with unleavened bread and bitter herbs" (Bamidbar 9:10-11).

Pesach Sheini is rightly understood as a beautiful paradigm of second chances, substitutions, and replacements. The 14th of Iyyar functions as a replacement for the 14th of Nisan. Pesach Sheini is not the only example of replacement in the parsha. Immediately prior, we learn of the transference of spiritual leadership from the bechorim (the elder sons), to the Levi'im.

"For they are formally assigned to Me from among the Israelites: I have taken them for Myself in place of all the first issue of the womb, of all the male firstborn of the Israelites" (Bamidbar 8:16).

The word "takhat" here is understood to mean "in place of," as the Levi'im replaced the bechorim as a consequence of the latter's participation in the golden calf debacle. Of note, takhat literally means "beneath." This word depicts the demotion of the bechorim who are now spiritually beneath the Levi'im. Unlike Pesach Sheini, which was a replacement of time, this is a replacement of people. This challenging edict does not carry with it the beauty of second chances. What must it have felt like to be those bechorim, watching someone else step into the role they anticipated having for themselves? What must they have experienced when being replaced?

If only these bechorim could have spoken with the numerous other bechorim in Tanakh who also endured the experience of replacement. Yishmael,

Esav, the ten tribes of Malchut Yisrael, and Menasheh ben Yosef surely would have been able to commiserate with this experience. They too lost special privileges and honor, watching others rise in their place. With the exception of Menasheh, the result was often struggle, alienation, and further negative behaviors.

Such antipathy towards replacement is evident in a fascinating study from the Technical University of Munich in 2019. Participants were asked if they would prefer to be replaced by people or robots. Most chose the latter:

People tend to compare themselves less with machines than with other people. Consequently, being replaced by a robot or a software poses less of a threat to their feeling of self-worth.

Bearing this in mind, let us return to Miriam. Miriam was Moshe and Aharon's elder sister. She was the bechorah and the first to receive nevuah (prophecy.) It was actually in Miriam's nevuah that Moshe's existence and unique role were first foretold. The gemara quotes Miriam as saying, "My mother will give birth to a son who will be the savior of Yisrael!" (Tractate Megillah 14a).

The fruition of her nevuah necessarily resulted in the diminution of her prophetic role. Her baby brother proved to be not only a savior but the greatest prophet in history. To some extent, Miriam had been replaced.

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What must it have felt like to be those bechorim, watching someone else step into the role they anticipated having for themselves?

Rabbanit Dalia Davis

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Leader, and Cherished Friend

On Spies, Daughters, and Claiming our Inheritance



Rabba Yaffa Epstein

Class of '15

Parshat Shelach is replete with tales of mutiny, betrayal, and disobedience: the tale of the spies, the punishment of the people, and the story of the Shabbat desecrator.

Yet there is a moment right at the beginning of the parsha when one little word has a critical impact on our understanding of the story of the meraglim, the spies.

The Parsha begins with the verse:

"Send men for yourself, and they will scout out the land of Canaan, which I am giving to Bnei Yisrael."

What is the significance of that word, "lecha," (for yourself)? Our interpretive tradition gives us a multitude of explanations of exactly what this simple two-letter word means in this context. One famous idea quoted by Rashi from Tractate Sotah 34b points to the word lecha as Hashem chastising Moshe and saying, "You Moshe, you need to send spies, but were you to have faith in me, you would not need to send these men." Another idea, taught to us by the Seforno, is that Moshe himself should be the one to choose the spies and not to allow the people to choose these men. But perhaps the most surprising interpretation comes to us from the Kli Yakar, Rabbi Shlomo Efraim MiLuntshiz, a 16th-century Polish scholar. While he offers several explanations of the verse, two of his interpretations of why the word lecha is used stand out, as they seem at odds with one another.

His first explanation begins by quoting Chazal, who ask the question of why the section dealing with the spies is placed next to the section of the Torah that deals with Miriam's slander against her brother Moshe. He explains, quoting Tractate Kiddushin 49b, that women are chatterers who often speak lashon harah (slander). Therefore, God instructs Moshe to choose men, as men do not speak lashon harah, and so they will not speak badly of the land.

However, in his second explanation, the Kli Yakar explains that God is saying to Moshe that **you**, Moshe, will choose men, but, were it up to me, I would choose women! Why? Because women love the land of Israel more than men do, and they would never speak badly about the land!

Here the Kli Yakar is relying on the Midrash in Yalkut Shimoni Parshat Pinchas, where we are told that the Daughters of Zlofchad come to demand their rightful inheritance of their father's share in the Land of Israel. The Midrash tells us:

Rabbi Natan said: The power of women is greater than that of men, for the men say "let us appoint a leader and let us return to Egypt" while the women say, "Give to us a share in the land!"

The Kli Yakar interprets this statement by Rabbi Natan to prove that women love the land of Israel more than men do, and hence Moshe would have done well to send them in the place of men.

While we may feel heartened by the Kli Yakar's explanation about the superiority of women, in truth, this explanation is as problematic as the explanation about women being idle chatterers. In a way, by making women extraordinary in their love for Eretz Yisrael, they remain outside the realm of the average people who make up the Jewish community.

However, perhaps there is still a way to understand the Kli Yakar's desire to elevate the Daughters of Zlofchad without marginalizing them to "other." Interestingly, the midrash uses an important word in describing the Daughters of Zlofchad. Unlike the Kli Yakar's use of the word "love" of the land, the midrash uses the word koach: the "power" of women is greater than of the men.

What was the power of Bnot Zlofchad here? When faced with a reality that seemed unjust to them, a reality that they could not accept, they had the strength—and indeed this takes great strength—to see past their current reality to a new and a different possibility where they could receive their rightful inheritance in the land.

The meraglim, on the other hand, fail in that exact arena. They are sent to spy out the land, and they cannot see past their own fear. They can only see the reality that they are faced with and their own inadequacy. Therefore, when they return to the people, they are unable to bring with them any hope for the future or any possibility of a different national reality.

Perhaps the midrash deliberately contrasts the event of the meraglim with the Bnot Zlofchad to help us to understand that our own reality, our own koach, is determined by how we choose to see ourselves. If we see ourselves as weak and powerless, that is who we will be; we will want to return to the reality that we knew and understood, and we will stay confined in our own personal Egypt. However, if we step into our power, if we demand our achuza, our portion, then we will truly merit to receive it. That is a true showing of koach, of inner strength, and of faith.

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If we see ourselves as weak and powerless, that is who we will be; we will want to return to the reality that we knew and understood, and we will stay confined in our own personal Egypt.

Rabba Yaffa Epstein

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**IN LOVING MEMORY OF
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Beyond Mrs. On?



Rabbi Dr. Wendy Zierler

Class of '21

The first verse of Parshat Korach raises two significant questions:

Korach the son of Yitzhar the son of Kehat the son of Levi and Datan and Aviram the sons of Eliav and On the son of Pelet—the sons of Reuven—took (Bamidbar 16:1).

1. What did Korach and his retinue take?
2. Who is On Ben Pelet, who appears only once in this opening verse and is never mentioned again?

The gemara in BT Sanhedrin 109b offers the following:

Reish Lakish says: He purchased [lakach] a bad acquisition for himself, as through his actions he drove himself from the world.

The exact nature of this bad purchase is not specified in Reish Lakish's commentary. Rashi interprets the words "mekah ra" simply as "hithil biketatah:" he stirred up a fight, but supplies no additional explication. A midrash brought further down the page in the name of Rav, however, sheds additional light:

Rav says: On, son of Pelet, did not repent on his own; rather, his wife saved him. She said to him: What is the difference to you? If this Master, Moshe, is the great one, you are the student. And if this Master, Korach, is the great one, you are the student. Why are you involving yourself in this matter? On said to her: What shall I do? I was one of those who took counsel and I took an

oath with them that I would be with them. She said to him: I know that the entire assembly is holy, as it is written: "For all the assembly is holy" (Bamidbar 16:3), and they observe the restrictions of modesty. She said to him: Sit, for I will save you. She gave him wine to drink and caused him to become drunk and laid him on a bed inside their tent. She sat at the entrance of the tent and exposed her hair as though she were bathing. Anyone who came and saw her stepped back. In the meantime, the assembly of Korach was swallowed into the ground [and On the son of Pelet was spared]...

This oft-quoted midrash answers question two above, but it indirectly answers the first question too. Insofar as biblical marriage is signaled by way of the verb *lakach*, Rav's story about On's wife implies that while Korach made a bad matrimonial acquisition, On's was good and helped save his life. The gemara specifies the ways in which Korach's wife goaded her husband to rebel against Moshe's authority while On Ben Pelet's unnamed wife prevented him from further involvement in Korach's campaign. For this reason, Mrs. On is associated with the first part of Mishlei 14:1—the wisdom of women builds her house—whereas Mrs. Korach is associated with the second, opposing half of the verse: folly destroys it with her hands.

Given the obscurity of On Ben Pelet, it is remarkable that this midrash about his unnamed wife appears in so many contemporary divrei Torah about this parsha. The salutary influence of the wife of On ben Pelet as opposed to the malign influence of Korach's wife is trumpeted as evidence of the life-or-death importance of choosing the right wife. Indeed, On Ben Pelet's consort demonstrates laudable initiative, smarts, and insight, all of which save her husband's life.

Why, then, does this midrash leave a sour taste in my mouth?

It may be because the supposed excellence of On Ben Pelet's wife seems to depend on her husband having absolutely no agency, personality, or capacity to learn. On Ben Pelet never repented for his part in the rebellion and thus played no role in his own salvation. On's rank powerlessness is reinforced by all of the details of their exchange in the midrash, beginning with Mrs. On's asking, "What difference is any of this going to make to you?" Her use of the terms "rav" and "talmid" transfer this power struggle to the context of a beit midrash. Given the esteem accorded in the rabbinic tradition to the relationship of student and teacher, there would certainly be much at stake in choosing the right teacher or master. But not for On, who responds simply by claiming that he has given his word to Korach and thus he cannot change his current course of action.

Mrs. On further demonstrates the intellectual and moral acumen her husband lacks. Her decision to get On drunk and then to sit at the entrance of the tent with her hair exposed unveils the hypocrisy at the heart of Korach's claim regarding the congregation's holiness and (sexual) modesty, even as they make a bold and immodest grab for Moshe and Aharon's power. The reference in the midrash to a woman perched by a tent in a sexually provocative guise brings to mind the biblical Yael (Shoftim 4-5) luring an unsuspecting Sisera to his death. Here are brave Korach and his men, so easily frightened away by Mrs. On's ruse, while On himself is dead drunk, unconscious to what is going on around him.

Viewed from one angle, this midrash presents an admirable image of an unnamed, unheralded woman who takes control of a situation to save her hapless husband's life. Viewed from another angle, however, Mrs. On's agency and smarts become less about women's capacity and more about On's shamefulness, and by extension that of all those who followed Korach, in the same way that in the

book of Judges, the feminine bravery of Devorah and Yael cast doubt on the honor of men in their community.

To be sure, the Talmud's willingness to imagine a woman who has the brains and moral clarity to save her husband is a welcome alternative to those who would see these traits as incompatible with femininity. The Meshivat Nefesh (Yochanan Luria, 15th-16th century Alsatian Talamudist) on Bereishit 18 refers to Mrs. On's having distanced her husband from this conflict as an act that contradicted her basic, feminine nature:

[B]ecause women tend to be jealous and to foment argument and to send their husbands astray.

Forced to choose between these two alternatives, I'll gladly take the wife of On Ben Pelet as depicted in BT Sanhedrin over the version presented by the Meshivat Nefesh. But I'd rather posit another model entirely. Writing at a time of great women scholars and professionals, whose Torah learning augments and complements rather than undermines that of their partners, whose power and agency are not tricksterism and sexual provocation but wise leadership and collaborative problem solving, the Talmudic story of Mrs. On Ben Pelet emerges for as a mark of how far, indeed, Jewish women have come. There are so many stories that our new generation of women scholars, activists, leaders, and partners will need to pen so that we can write ourselves back into our own tradition and become a true part of its "holy congregation."

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Rabba Sara Hurwitz, with gratitude**

Do Opposites Attract?



Maharat Ruth Friedman

Class of '13

Of all the troubled sibling relationships in Bereishit, the relationship between Yaakov and Esav is among the most painful to study. Even prior to their birth, Yaakov and Esav are at odds, struggling in Rivka's womb. From the moment they are born, they are total opposites, which only pushes them further apart. As children and then adults, their relationship is plagued by competition and deception, forcing Yaakov to flee after he steals Esav's blessing. At no point during their childhood and earlier adult years do they get along.

Their story does offer one glimmer of hope, when they reunite many years later as Yaakov and his family travel back to Canaan. The brothers encounter each other directly and fall into a weeping embrace. The text provides a sense of relief and a temporary ability to believe that time has healed the wounds from their younger adult life; they now seem prepared to overcome their differences and appreciate each other as family.

Tragically, our hopes for a permanent reconciliation are shattered by a scene in Parshat Chukat. As the Israelites, Yaakov's descendants, approach Edom, Esav's descendants, they issue an ostensibly simple request:

“Thus says your brother Israel: You know all the hardships that have befallen us; that our ancestors went down to Egypt, that we dwelt in Egypt a long time, and that the Egyptians dealt harshly with us and our ancestors. We cried to the Lord and God heard our plea, and God sent a messenger

who freed us from Egypt. Now we are in Kadesh, the town on the border of your territory. Allow us, then, to cross your country. We will not pass through fields or vineyards, and we will not drink water from wells. We will follow the king's highway, turning off neither to the right nor to the left until we have crossed your territory” (Bamidbar 20:14-17).

But the Israelites' request for passage is met with hostility:

But Edom answered him, “You shall not pass through us, else we will go out against you with the sword.” “We will keep to the beaten track,” the Israelites said to them, “and if we or our cattle drink your water, we will pay for it. We ask only for passage on foot—it is but a small matter.” But they replied, “You shall not pass through!” And Edom went out against them in heavy force, strongly armed. So Edom would not let Israel cross their territory, and Israel turned away from them (Bamidbar 20: 18-21).

Many see this passage as confirming what our rabbinic tradition has taught us about Esav: unlike Yaakov, a man of peace, Esav is violent towards everyone. And so it is not surprising that, many generations later, Esav's descendants exhibit violence towards Yaakov's descendants during their time of need.

Rashi, however, cites a fascinating midrash that connects this encounter back to Yitzchak's blessings for his two sons:

Else we will go out against you with the sword: You pride yourselves with the “voice” your father bequeathed you (the voice is the voice of Yaakov), and declare,

“We cried out to the Lord, and God heard our voice” (verse 16). But we will go out against you with what my father bequeathed me: “You shall live by the sword” (Bereishit 27:40)— [Midrash Tanchuma Beshallah 9] (Commentary on Bamidbar 20:18).

According to the Tanchuma, Edom’s refusal to allow the Israelites to pass through their land is not simply an expression of their generally violent tendencies. Rather, it hearkens back to the blessings that Yitzchak bestowed upon his two sons when Yaakov stole Esav’s blessing. Yitzchak recognized Yaakov’s voice, but in spite of his uncertainty over the true identity of the son claiming to be Esav, he gave the first born’s blessing to Yaakov. He then gave a weeping Esav a separate blessing, including that he shall live by the sword. And now, centuries later, the descendants of these twin boys are now realizing the blessings; the Israelites are asking for mercy on the basis of their voice, and the Edomites are responding through the sword.

So what are we to make of this midrash? Why is it significant to connect this scene in Chukat all the way back to Bereishit?

I believe this connection teaches a vital lesson about managing relationships. Yaakov and Esav began their lives at odds with each other. However, it is not this fact alone that was responsible for them becoming enemy nations. Rather, as Rav Hirsch teaches in his commentary on Bereishit, it was Rivka and Yitzchak’s flawed parenting that created this divide. Rather than embrace the opportunity to nurture their sons according to their individual needs, Yitzchak and Rivka instead chose to play favorites.

This flawed choice was the fatal blow to the hope of salvaging the twins’ relationship. Because Rivka and Yitzchak created this dynamic between their children, Yaakov felt that he could deceive his father (with his mother’s encouragement) to take the blessing. According to the midrash, the

outcomes of this dynamic, hundreds of years later, encouraged further strife between the brothers’ descendants.

If we read the events of this week’s parsha on the surface, they appear to affirm our understanding of Yaakov as a man of peace and Esav as a man of violence. But as the midrash and Rav Hirsch teach us, the tragic hostility that Edom exhibits towards Israel in this parsha was not just a result of personality differences but rather a tragic parenting error with eternal consequences. This interaction serves as a powerful reminder that when we are presented with the challenge of managing different children with different needs, it is our responsibility to embrace and appropriately manage differences rather than pit them against each other.

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...when we are presented with the challenge of managing different children with different needs, it is our responsibility to embrace and appropriately manage differences...

Maharat Ruth Friedman

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Balak

Standing for Humanity



Rabba Daniella Pressner

Class of '20

Rabbi Dr. Ariel Burger recounts a story, in a conversation with Krista Tippett on *On Being*, of a rabbit farm on the outskirts of Auschwitz where the Nazis treated their rabbits better than their Jewish slave laborers. On this farm, one of the workers was a Polish man who repeatedly snuck food in for the slave laborers and inmates. One day, a woman receiving bread cut her arm on a piece of barbed wire; the wound became infected, and she required antibiotics. The Polish man cut open *his* arm and placed his wound on her wound so that *he* would become infected. He then went to the rabbit farm owner to procure the antibiotics to save this woman's life.

Parshat Balak is one of the most unusual stories in Tanakh; it is a story of prophets, sorcery, and even a talking donkey. Its moral message is also elusive. There are three moments when God appears in front of Bilam to guide him in making a better choice: two times in the form of a prophecy and the third time in the form of an angel. In this way, God models the idea that sometimes individuals need outside support to actualize their potential. Striving in this way requires courage and moral clarity and, in Bilam's case, repeated opportunities to try again. Bilam's inability to see beyond himself impacted his ability to bring blessing, of his own volition, to Israel. Perhaps the choice to do what is right only becomes simpler when we are willing to put humanity at the center of our choices, independent of personal motives that often cloud this clarity. Bilam can actualize potential by being open to seeing truth with honesty and humility, regardless of preconceptions.

We learn that Moshe modeled the highest form of prophecy as he was "mechuvan umezuman," always "directed and ready" to accept prophecy (Mishna Torah, Hilkhhot Yesidei HaTorah 7:6). What would our world look like if each of us spent more time dedicating ourselves to this vision?

Balak repeatedly commands Bilam to curse the Nation of Israel, and Bilam reminds him that all he can do is serve as God's mouthpiece. He states, "hadavar asher yasim Elohim b'pi, oto adaber." "Only the word which God puts into my mouth, I will utter" (Bamidbar 22:38). While Bilam's words reflect God's intentions, it is not clear that his actions follow this pattern. God warns him not to go to curse the nation, and yet Bilam decides to move forward. But God does not give up on Bilam. "VaYavo Elohim el Bilam." "And God came toward Bilam" (Bamidbar 22:20), as if to say, "you may have made a poor choice but I will hold you to your potential." God gives Bilam multiple opportunities to change course, even sending a malakh Hashem, an angel, to stand in his way so that he does not curse the nation (Bamidbar 22:22). Three times the angel stands before Bilam and his donkey, and three times Bilam strikes his donkey to proceed. While the donkey responds, instinctively recognizing that something needs to change, Bilam does not budge. Instead he berates his donkey for his poor behavior. One message is clear: one needn't be a savant or a prophet to look out for humanity; even donkeys have instincts. And still, God does not give up on Bilam and has the donkey speak to help articulate this message. Despite God's efforts to help Bilam rise to his potential, though, he refuses and becomes simply a conduit for blessing against his will.

On the one hand, Bilam could be praised for his commitment to expressing God's words. On the other hand, the story teaches that simply following commands rarely addresses the call to stand for humanity. Bilam has the opportunity to bless Israel

or to work to prevent Balak from cursing Israel. But he chooses to stand idly by instead of performing God's work in this world. He fails at the basic value of honoring humanity, the work of living Torah. Parshat Balak teaches that God's words do not have relevance unless they are lived and applied. Bilam stubbornly refuses to see past his ability to be a conduit; he sees his purpose as transactional as opposed to transformational. And yet, this story fascinatingly presents a God who, time and again, does not give up. Why?

In speaking of Bilam, Rav Yochanan teaches, "m'birchato...atah lomad mah b'libo," "from his blessing...you learn what was in his heart" (Sanhedrin, 105b). While Bilam means to curse Israel, only blessings come out, suggesting that Bilam is not simply a conduit for God's words but that, in his heart of hearts, Bilam wants to bless Israel. Perhaps this is why God models repeated opportunities for Bilam to act with moral clarity, to bravely resist the cultures around him, and to stand up for the sake of humanity. In continuing to expect more from Bilam, God reveals the value of helping others rise to their potential and not to be swayed by external influence. All humans—and even donkeys—have the potential to bring greater chesed to the world. God models a commitment to humanity that stands at the center of not just our words but our actions. God teaches us that when we notice others not reaching their potential, we must work alongside them, and we should hope that others do the same for us. This commitment to each other and to humanity's potential brings light to this world and often has the capacity to save lives and, ultimately, generations.

The most beautiful part of the rabbit farm story is that it doesn't end there. The grandchild of the Jewish woman who survived finds the man in Poland who saved his grandmother's life, visits him, and says, "Thank you. Thank you for my life." Just as God sees the "crack" in Bilam as an opportunity for his growth and his potential, our superhuman strength is our desire to help everyone reach theirs by calling on each person to bring greater light to this world.

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God models a commitment to humanity that stands at the center of not just our words but our actions.

Rabba Daniella Pressner

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Pinchas

Truth and Peace



Rabba Dr. Anat Sharbat

Class of '15

The days around the time of Bein Hametzarim—the three weeks between the 17th of Tammuz and Tisha B'Av—remind us to revisit the pasuk in Zecharia that talks about fast days becoming days of joys:

So said the LORD of hosts: The fast of the fourth month, and the fast of the fifth, and the fast of the seventh, and the fast of the tenth, shall be to the house of Yehuda joy and gladness, and cheerful seasons; [therefore] you shall love truth and peace (Zecharia 8:19).

Zecharia instructs us that we should make fast days and days of mourning into joyous days through love of truth and peace.

Truth and peace at face value may seem to be contradictory; at least, they do not stand together easily. In order to maintain peace, sometimes we must set truth aside. Indeed, when Aharon is famously described in the Mishna (Avot 1:12) as "a lover of peace and a pursuer of peace," we learn that for the purpose of making peace, it is sometimes necessary to stretch the truth. Avot D'Rabbi Natan famously tells the story of Aharon going to two friends who had a fight and telling each of them how much the other side wants to make peace with the other, so we can see that Aharon was lenient about the truth in order to create peace.

Truth on its own often does the opposite of bringing peace. One who is occupied with his or her own righteousness leaves no room to see anyone else's

perspective or to allow peace to enter alongside the truth.

Parshat Pinchas, which often coincides with Bein Hametzarim, is a parsha of truth. When Pinchas rises up with a spear and kills Cozbi bat Tzur and Zimri ben Salu as they were committing the sins of adultery and avoda zara, he does so in the name of justice, in the name of the truth of God's law. He does so to uphold a principle. Can you imagine an intimate act, especially one that is forbidden, being performed in public? Pinchas rises up out of the congregation and employs extreme violence against Zimri and Cozbi, fired by his zeal for the truth.

But Parshat Pinchas is also a parsha of peace.

In the story of Pinchas, God grants Pinchas a covenant of peace. The Ha'amek Davar explains giving a peace covenant to the zealous Pinchas as a balancing tool, an immunization against the possible spiritual damage caused by zealotry. This is not a reward, as the simple meaning of the verses may seem to suggest, but rather, "[God] blessed him with the attribute of peace, that he should not be overly strict and become angry... that he should always be at ease and endowed with the attribute of peace" (Ha'amek Davar 25, 12).

From these words it again appears that truth is the opposite of peace; that peace restrains truth. The price of peace is a compromise of truth, giving up on the stance of justice.

But is it? Can the values of peace and truth coexist, or do they only contradict one another?

The Gemara in Sanhedrin (82a) brings three perspectives on why Pinchas acted as he did. One of them is in the name of Rabbi Eliezer:

Rabbi Yitzhak says that Rabbi Eliezer says: He saw that an angel came and destroyed among the people in punishment for the sin of Zimri, and he realized that he must take immediate action to ameliorate the situation.

The Gemara explains that the destruction of the people probably refers to the plague that killed 24,000 people. So, Pinchas' stabbing of Zimri and Cozbi was not because he was acting as a zealot for God but rather because he cared about Am Yisrael. Understanding that the actions of Zimri and Cozbi were the cause of the plague, Pinchas sought to stop them so the plague would stop.

The Gemara continues (82b) again in the name of Rabbi Eliezer:

“And Pinchas stood and wrought judgment and the plague was stayed” (Psalms 106:30). Rabbi Elazar says: It is not stated in the verse: And prayed [vayit-pallel]; rather, it is stated vaye-falel. This teaches that Pinchas, as it were, wrought judgment [pelilut] with his Creator.

The story of Pinchas thus opens up the possibility that truth and peace can coexist. While Pinchas killed Zimri and Cozbi in the name of the truth of God's laws, he also did so out of care and love for the nation. Pinchas' actions were those of peace intertwined with truth.

This point also arises in the context of the two famous halakhic schools: Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai. Beit Shammai's opinion was that the highest priority must be God's law and, therefore, that truth takes precedence over peace. In contrast, Beit Hillel strove to be involved with those on earth and to enable people to be able to live according to the halakha. Beit Hillel were prepared to live with compromise, even a compromise of principles, rather than issue rulings difficult for human nature to accept. In their opinion, peace came before the truth.

And, indeed, it was ultimately determined that the halakha goes according to Beit Hillel. This does not mean that their ruling was more just or correct than that of Beit Shammai but that we should adopt their approach because it considers the limitations of reality and of the people actually practicing the halakha.

Perhaps we can learn from Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai that peace and truth can coexist.

In Massekhet Yevamot, the Gemara relates that Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai disagreed vehemently about the status of women in marriage in a number of halakhically complicated situations. Nevertheless, Beit Shammai did not abstain from marrying women from the families of Beit Hillel, nor did Beit Hillel refrain from marrying those from Beit Shammai. This teaches us that they showed love and friendship towards each other, putting into practice that which is written: “You shall love truth and peace” (Yevamot 14b).

We should strive for truth but act out of peace, just like Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai.

In order to bring redemption to the world, we must understand that it is our responsibility to embrace this dialectic, both ours and that of others. Only then will the great change that Zecharia speaks of take place; only when we are sensitive to the struggle that exists between truth and peace will the days of mourning become days of joy.

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Zelda R. Stern

IN MEMORY OF

**my beloved, feminist husband,
Stanley I. Rosenzweig z”l, who cheered
on Maharat from its inception**

Matot-Masei

An Opportunity for Teshuva


Rabba Claudia Marbach

Class of '18

After 40 years of wandering in the desert, Bnei Yisrael are on the banks of the Yarden. The last time they were there, they sent the spies to check out the land. Upon the spies' return, the people chose to hear only the negative reports. Consequently, they were punished with a long, arduous journey. Once again, Bnei Yisrael stand at a crossroads. How will they proceed? The Gemara in Yoma 86b tells us that the essence of teshuva is being in the same place and choosing a different path. We are also in the weeks before Tisha B'Av, when, as Rabbi Alan Lew teaches, "we are reminded that catastrophes will keep recurring in our lives until we get things right, until we learn what we need to learn from them." Maybe this year we can think of this critical moment before Bnei Yisrael fought their way into the land as sparking our process of teshuva.

Matot begins with laws about taking vows and oaths: who can make them and how to annul them. The Or HaChaim says that both vows and oaths fall into two categories: the spiritual and the physical. The first refers to our performance of mitzvot and the second to what we eat and drink and where and with whom we live. Oaths and vows are often utilized to force us to change our behavior. The Rabbis take these commitments seriously but also show compassion, instituting Kol Nidre, our annual public annulment of vows. Using vows as a tool to change our habits is tricky. While often useful catalysts, they can sometimes be too blunt an instrument. When we publicly annul our vows on Yom Kippur, we are admitting how difficult it is to

change and acknowledging the need to forgive ourselves and others.

The Talmud tells us that the destruction of the Temple was caused by *sinat chinam*, senseless hatred. Midrash Tehillim 12 tells us that “every statement that God said to Moshe, God would say forty-nine reasons (*panim*, literally faces) that a matter could be pure, and forty-nine reasons that a matter could be impure.” This text invites us to approach others with intellectual humility and curiosity. Maybe one way to find our way to teshuva is not through oaths sworn in haste but through patient dialogue.

Later in Matot, the representatives of the tribes of Reuven, Gad, and half of Menashe ask Moshe for permission to settle on the eastern bank of the Yarden. Moshe reacts with horror and anger, assuming they plan to abandon the rest of the people in the fight to capture the land. Moshe is immediately reminded of the incident of the spies, accusing Reuven, Gad, and Menashe of fomenting division and controversy among the people. Ramban explains that Moshe thought that these tribes were either scared like the spies, too lacking in belief in God to enter the land of Israel, or too focussed on material possessions. Moshe does not consider the reasons they might have had for wanting to stay behind. The tribe leaders do not anticipate Moshe’s perspective either and do not understand Moshe’s belief that God should decide who settles where. When they explain their plan to settle their families and then promise to be on the front lines of the battles, Moshe is appeased, and they are later lauded for their bravery (Devarim 33:20).

Vows and oaths cut off dialogue while teshuva provides opportunities for conversations, curiosity, and humility. The end of Masechet Yoma tells us that we have to ask for forgiveness three times (Yoma 87a). The Gemara then goes on to tell stories about how rabbis searched for opportunities for reconciliation. Rabbi Zeira would pace outside a place where someone who had wronged him

would be, and Rav sought Rabbi Hanina’s forgiveness for thirteen years in a row (Yoma 87a-b). The three weeks between the 17th of Tammuz and Tisha B’Av are called “*bein hametzarim*,” between the narrow places. Like Bnei Yisrael, we stand at a crossroads, just beginning to think about our own process of teshuva. Like Bnei Yisrael at the Yarden river, let us focus not on setting inflexible vows and resolutions but seeking out conversation, understanding, and new perspectives.

“

**Using vows as a tool to
change our habits is tricky.
While often useful catalysts,
they can sometimes be too
blunt an instrument.**

Rabba Claudia Marbach

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**Mom, Emily, Ezra, and Cecily and
the rest of the family**

IN HONOR OF
Rabba Claudia Marbach,
whose deep love of Torah
permeates all that she does

Devarim

דְּבָרִים

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courageous leadership**

Devarim

The Beauty of Transformation



Karolyn Benger

Class of '26

It doesn't seem fair that Moshe is not allowed to enter the Land of Israel. After showing so much devotion to Hashem, leading the people through the wilderness, and enduring the constant strain of authority, how could it be that his merits did not outweigh his sin, enabling him to cross the border? There wasn't one little exemption that could be made for Moshe Rabbenu, the greatest prophet we will ever know? For many of us, this screams of injustice, and we may struggle to understand how a compassionate God could act this way toward His most beloved servant.

Sefer Devarim stands out from the other books in the Torah for several reasons. First, it is a repetition of laws that were given at Har Sinai. In fact, it is often called Mishna Torah, "repetition of the Torah," for this reason. Moshe reminds the people of these laws when they are about to enter the land and must live in accordance with them, as, in the desert, many of the laws did not yet apply. Second, Rambam states that since the incident with the spies, the Jewish people have been without prophecy for 38 years. According to Rambam, this communication is coming from Moshe directly, not from Hashem through him, as was the case in the past. In Moshe's expounding on the meaning of the laws, he emerges as more than a prophet, obtaining his ultimate status as our teacher, Moshe Rabbenu.

Parshat Devarim marks the beginning of profound changes for our people too. We are no longer wandering in the desert; we are about to claim our homeland. We are not reliant on God to provide our

daily bread; we will soon work the land for our sustenance. Devarim marks the end of our living with a constant, miraculous presence of God. From this point on, our relationship with God is less directly observable; God's actions are less visible to us. Parshat Devarim is thus the end of what we have known and the birth of something new and beautiful—an independent, self-sustaining people living within our land and in accordance with our law.

Juxtaposed to this image of an independent, self-sustaining people, Devarim is read around the time of Tisha B'Av, a day that commemorates the destruction of the Beit HaMikdash and our loss of political sovereignty and independence. Certainly, we faced tremendous grief and suffering with the loss of our Temple. It would be impossible to enumerate all of the persecutions we endured as a result of our exile, and any attempt to do so would only diminish this trauma. Yet, even from the depths of this anguish, injustice, and tragedy, we can see the beginning of a beautiful transformation of our people.

Losing the Temple was emotionally and psychologically traumatic. It eradicated Judaism as we knew it. No longer could we bring sacrifices to atone for our sins or mark holidays with pilgrimages to Jerusalem. And yet Judaism itself was not eradicated; rather, it transformed. Rabbinic Judaism and exilic Judaism were born out of the ashes of the Beit Hamikdash.

Utilizing incredible knowledge of the Torah, lessons of their teachers, and intellectual acumen, our Rabbis reframed our worship from a sacrifice-based approach to one based on prayer, learning, and chesed. Analyzing each verse, every word, and even individual vowels, these great leaders built an edifice of religious practice through the framework of the Torah. Our Rabbis established a form of Judaism that allowed people to remain a distinct nation and continue serving God across disparate lands without a Temple. This system that they established has endured for over 2,000 years.

“

Our Rabbis established a form of Judaism that allowed people to remain a distinct nation and continue serving God across disparate lands without a Temple.

Karolyn Benger

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Ann and Jeremy Pava

Va'etchanan

How to Love God: Shema as a User's Manual



Rabbanit Lisa Schlaff

Class of '21

In Parshat Va'etchanan, we encounter one of the most familiar passages in Jewish liturgy—the first paragraph of Shema (Devarim 6:4-9). Let's take a moment, though, to imagine this passage through a less familiar lens—through the eyes of the people hearing it for the first time. As part of his final speech to Bnei Yisrael at the culmination of their journey through the desert, Moshe commands them:

“You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”

Interestingly, this is the first time the notion of loving God appears in the Torah. To the desert Jew who knew of God through the splitting of the sea, the thunder and lightning of matan Torah, mass plague, and bread falling from the sky, this was a shocking statement. “You must fear God”—yes. “You must be in awe of God”—certainly. “You must love God” would have been an incomprehensible command.

And so, as Bible professor Jeffrey Tigay suggests, the first paragraph of shema makes it clear that loving God is not an abstract emotion but is grounded in the concrete observance of mitzvot. The commandment to take the mitzvot to heart can be read as a direct explication of what it means to love God. Building upon this idea, it is possible to read the entire first paragraph of shema as a user's manual for how to love God.

We are first commanded to internalize the mitzvot—to literally take them to heart. In the context of the Jews in the desert, this meant the mitzvot Moshe is about to present to them in his final speech. It is significant that everyone is included in this command. Moshe is not speaking only to the elite, only to the priests, or only to the men. All of Yisrael must place the mitzvot upon our hearts. Once we have internalized the mitzvot, we are then able to teach them to our children. On an airplane, we must put on our own oxygen mask before placing one on our children. We need to fortify ourselves with mitzvot prior to passing them on. The word used in explaining how to educate our children is v'shinantam, repeat them. We show our love of God not through speaking of mitzvot when the occasion arises but through constant conversation, even when it feels repetitive. We show our love of God through mass universal education in mitzvot.

Where are we supposed to speak about mitzvot? We should do so at home and away from home: everywhere. There is no distinction between private space and public space; loving God means that all space is to be filled with conversation about mitzvot. When are we supposed to speak about mitzvot? When we lie down and when we get up: all the time. Loving God means that all time is to be filled with conversation about mitzvot.

After being instructed to speak about the mitzvot everywhere and all the time, we are commanded to literally bind the mitzvot on our bodies “as a sign on your hand.” This physical binding, on top of our constant conversation about mitzvot, is a further expression of our love of God. Once we have placed the mitzvot upon our bodies, the next step is to place them on our homes. The mitzvot are to be placed on our doorposts, in our liminal spaces. When we exit one reality and enter another, we need to be reminded of the mitzvot. Lastly, the mitzvot are to be placed in the city gates. Once we have internalized the mitzvot and shared them with our children, we share them with the community. The project of loving God involves engaging as

individuals, as members of a family, and as members of a community.

Returning to the Jews in the desert, the command to love God is no longer amorphous or jarring; it is grounded in concrete action items. We express love to our children not only by saying “I love you” but by sitting on the floor and playing puzzles with them. We express love to our parents not only by saying “I love you” but by doing the grocery shopping when needed. And to God, we might not say “I love you” at all, but we fill our lives with daily ritual—everywhere and all the time—that is a powerful expression of love.

This Shabbat and every day, may we find comfort in our own constant and repetitive expression of this love.

“

**We show our love of God
through mass universal
education in mitzvot.**

Rabbanit Lisa Schlaff

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Losing and Finding Our Way



Rabbanit Judith Levitan

Class of '20

As Moshe continues his narrative in Parshat Eikev, he intersperses his story with a fleeting description of part of the route taken by Bnei Yisrael as they wandered the desert. He then links this journey to the death of Aharon.

The children of Israel journeyed from the wells of Bnei Yaakan to Moserah. There Aharon died and they buried him there and Elazar his son became the Priest in his stead.

From there they journeyed to Gudgod and from Gudgod to Yatvata, a land of brooks and water (Devarim 10:6-7).

This account of their journey seemingly contradicts the narrative in Bamidbar (33:31-37), which sees Bnei Yisrael travelling in the opposite direction, from Moserot' to Bnei Yaakan.' According to this first account, the death of Aharon occurs on Mount Hor, further along the journey from Moserah.

The Rabbis are clearly aware of this apparent contradiction and offer different approaches to its reconciliation.

Ibn Ezra argues that, in fact, there is no contradiction because the places mentioned in Devarim are distinct from those mentioned in Bamidbar. On the other extreme, modern biblical critics use these verses as support for the argument that there are two biblical authors, as reflected in the two accounts of the same story.

Rashi holds a middle ground. He reconciles the two accounts of the journey based on the gemara that

describes the reaction of the Jewish people to the death of Aharon (Rosh Hashana 3a). The fuller story behind Moshe's words is explained by Rashi in the following way:

Aharon dies on Mount Hor and the Clouds of Glory that have cushioned and protected Bnei Yisrael for forty years disperse. Bnei Yisrael are left physically exposed and spiritually vulnerable. Emboldened by this perceived weakness, the Canaanite King of Arad wages war against them.

Despite forty years of a miraculous existence in the desert under Hashem's care, Bnei Yisrael cannot overcome their primal impulse in the face of adversity. The nation cries out, "let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt." Overcome by the challenges facing them, Bnei Yisrael lose their way and flee. They retrace their steps from Mount Hor, past the wells of Bnei Yaakan to Moserah. The tribe of Levi pursues them, and a battle between the tribes ensues at Moserah. There are casualties on all sides.

It is at Moserah that Bnei Yisrael literally do battle with themselves. Here they are forced to confront their new reality without Aharon, and this struggle leaves them depleted. It may also be the catalyst for them to express their grief over Aharon's passing. Once they have done this, they are then able to reorient themselves and continue on their journey forward towards the Land of Israel.

It is interesting to note that the journey in Bamidbar (Bamidbar 33:31-37) alludes to seven places where Bnei Yisrael camped before reaching Mount Hor (the eighth stop). If we follow the narrative of Rashi, Bnei Yisrael camped at seven places following their retreat from Mount Hor. Perhaps the significance of these seven stops can be seen to correspond to the seven days of shiva or mourning for the departed.

The journey to which Moshe refers in Parshat Eikev is the journey of grief and loss. It references Bnei Yisrael “losing their way” after they lose Aharon.

Their experience of disorientation from life as it was known and reorientation towards an altered reality, punctuated by the loss, is a foundational theme in both classic and more contemporary psychological models of grieving. Classic approaches conceptualize grieving as a staged process. Disorientation is characterised by experiences of:

- denial, anger, bargaining, and depression (based on the work of Elizabeth Kubler Ross) or
- shock, yearning /protest, despair (based on the theories of John Bowlby and Colin Murray Parkes). What then follows is a reorientation expressed as acceptance and recovery.

The more contemporary approaches understand grieving as the movement between two parallel axes of disorienting and reorienting behaviour. Grieving is considered both a physical and emotional process according to the two-track model of bereavement. It is not a linear process; rather, it continues throughout a person’s life. According to the dual process model of coping with bereavement, we oscillate between coping with the experience of death and the life changes that result from it. As we grieve, we navigate our way through processes that focus on both loss and restoration.

This grieving experience is mirrored in the narrative of the midrash. As each of the leaders of Bnei Yisrael die, their accompanying miracles cease. Bnei Yisrael are forced to confront the death of their leader, but their physical reality is a daily reminder of the leader’s absence. According to the Midrash, when Miriam dies, Bnei Yisrael lose their continuing source of water. When Aharon dies, the Clouds of Glory dissipate. The loss is doubled. Bnei Yisrael must contend with the loss of Aharon and the loss of the effect of his presence in the world.

The journey of Bnei Yisrael described by Moshe in Parshat Eikev is echoed in our national experience after Tisha B’Av. Having just emerged from a mourning period, we enter a period of comfort and consolation. Parshat Eikev is the second of the seven parshiot where we are comforted by the words of the Prophet Yeshayahu. Once again, we see this seven-step process that guides our focus from loss toward restoration.

We reach a point in the Jewish calendar when we begin to reorient ourselves and change our focus from mourning to self-reflection. Now, with the period of mourning behind us, we begin to look forward towards the month of Elul. We begin to focus on the opportunities to repair our relationships and deepen our connections to Hashem and to each other.



The more contemporary approaches understand grieving as the movement between two parallel axes of disorienting and reorienting behaviour.

Rabbanit Judith Levitan

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Binaries and Bias



**Rabba Dr. Lindsey
Taylor-Guthartz**
Class of '21

“See, this day I set before you blessing and curse: blessing, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I enjoin upon you this day; and curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the Lord your God, but turn away from the path that I enjoin upon you this day ...” (Devarim 11:26-28).

Parshat Re'eh starts with God presenting the people with two alternatives: a blessing and a curse, along with a warning that our behavior will determine which one we receive. The blessing will be given if we follow God's commandments, but the curse will strike us if we abandon or neglect them. This all feels pretty obvious. But it's not the binary, either-or, take-it-or-leave-it choice it seems at first glance. Rashi notes that the Hebrew words used for the two occurrences of “if” are not the same: the first, which relates to the potential blessing, is “asher,” while the second, associated with the potential curse, is the more usual word “im.” Using this difference—and probably picking up on the similarity of asher to ashrei (meaning “happy”)—Rashi interprets this difference as telling us that God's blessings are unconditional. They are given to us before we earn them. However, in contrast, God's curses are conditional: they only apply after we have sinned. God has rigged the system in our favor.

This favorable divine bias appears a second time in the book of Devarim, where Moshe winds up his long speech to Bnei Yisrael with a repetition of this choice, in the famous passage in Devarim 30:19–20, which parallels “blessing” with “life” and “curse” with “death.” Here we are unambiguously instructed on

how to make this choice: “Choose life—if you and your offspring would live—by loving the Lord your God, heeding his commands, and holding fast to Him.” The motif of this life-and-death choice, with its divine bias and clear instructions about which option to choose, thus bookends the central section of Devarim. The Torah is deliberately choosing to emphasize a radically daring assertion: God is not neutral or dispassionate but is deeply involved with us, over and over again calling us to make the right choices for our own benefit.

This theme occurs again in the haftarah, a lyrical passage from Yeshayahu that is the third of the seven haftarot of consolation. These follow the sorrow and mourning of Tisha B’av, the anniversary of the destruction of both the first and second Temples, caused by our failure as a people to make the right choice. The prophet calls to us: “Ho, all who are thirsty, come for water, even if you have no money; come, buy food and eat; buy food without money, wine and milk without cost” (Yeshayahu 55:1). What is God offering the people here, through the medium of His prophet?

The medieval commentator David Kimchi (1160–1235, also known as Radak) notes that all the good things mentioned in this verse are metaphors for Torah: just as life is impossible without water, so it is impossible without Torah; just as wine makes people happy, so does the Torah; and just as milk nourishes children and makes them grow, so the Torah nourishes us and encourages our inner growth and flourishing. Yeshayahu tells us that God is a generous, even a reckless, giver, endlessly offering us the best He has to give, in spite of a long line of disappointments when we reject His gifts or misuse them. Surely it is no accident that, after commemorating our failures on Tisha B’Av, the rabbis felt we needed to be reminded that God endlessly calls us to accept His generosity.

As we approach the High Holidays, we focus on teshuva, on returning to God. We often, quite naturally, think about teshuva from our end of the process: reflecting on our sins and shortcomings,

resolving to change our ways, fasting, and praying. Perhaps our path to teshuvah would be smoothed and facilitated if we also spent time focusing on the loving generosity, the chesed, and the endless patience of God as revealed in both the parshah and in the haftarah. In Yeshayahu’s words (55:2–3), we can hear God’s yearning and love for us: “Give heed to Me, and you shall eat choice food and enjoy the richest viands; incline your ear and come to Me; hearken and you shall be revived.”



**Perhaps our path to teshuva
would be smoothed and
facilitated if we also spent
time focusing on the loving
generosity, the chesed, and the
endless patience of God...**

Rabba Dr. Lindsey Taylor-Guthartz

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IN HONOR OF

My hevruta,

**Rabba Lindsey Taylor-Guthartz,
with love and gratitude**

Shoftim

Fighting for Work-Life Balance



Rabba Dina Brawer

Class of '18

Parshat Shoftim discusses who may be exempt from conscription to the army:

Whatever man has built a new house and not dedicated it... Whatever man has planted a vineyard and not enjoyed it... Whatever man has betrothed a woman and not wed her, let him go and return to his house, lest another man... (Devarim 20:5-7).

There is a distinct sense of empathy for the man who is about to enjoy a rewarding moment in life and who may be ambivalent about going to war, torn between duty and the risk of losing all that he worked for.

The Torah returns to the topic of exemptions from war a few chapters later: "When a man takes a new wife, he shall not go out in the army and shall not cross over on its account for any matter. He shall be exempt in his house for a year and gladden his wife who he has taken" (Devarim 24:5).

The mishna in Sotah 8:2,4 elaborates on the two sets of laws and infers two categories of exemptions. The engaged man is exempt from active combat duty, but he is not entirely free of responsibility to support the war effort; he must work to supply the troops with water and food or to repair the roads. The newlywed, however, in the mishna's language "does not move from his place." He has no obligation other than looking after his wife. This diction suggests a vulnerability in newlyweds and that dedicating time

and attention to one's spouse is crucial in the first year, when a couple has not yet built a reserve of resilience and trust in their relationship.

The above exemptions do not apply to all wars equally. The mishna distinguishes between milchemet reshut, a war of aggression waged for economic expansion, for which these exemptions apply, and milchemet mitzvah, a defensive war, for which there are no exemptions. In fact, even a bride and groom would have to leave their chuppah to support the battle in the latter instance (Sotah 8:7).

Perhaps we can creatively repurpose these passages to point to the challenge of earning a living.

In this reframing, milchemet mitzvah, a required battle, represents the struggle to earn a living to support one's family. Milchemet reshut, a discretionary battle, is representative of one's career ambitions. One is a vital battle; the other is nonessential. For many of us, a successful career is bound up with our identity and ego. Even when it entails sacrificing quality family time, we assure ourselves that all our hard work is essential. We can easily convince ourselves that our milchemet reshut is indeed a milchemet mitzvah!

Carefully distinguishing between the two can be useful in achieving an optimal life-work balance. But we do not necessarily have to choose. The mishna, in its application of the exemptions to war, suggests that there's a time and place for each type of battle. When establishing a new relationship, one is not only exempt from non-essential war but "does not move from his place." Nothing but the most vital needs should distract us from focusing entirely on our new spouse and anchoring our new relationship. This is at the core of shana rishona, the first year of marriage. Once our priorities to our spouse and family are firmly established, we can expand our horizons and follow our aspirations for personal success. Maintaining an awareness that this is a milchemet reshut reminds us to exempt ourselves at moments of significance.

Adopting this sedra's battle strategy in our daily struggle for livelihood means pausing to be truly present at the moments that matter most. Dedicating a new home or enjoying a new vineyard might mean, in a contemporary setting, being fully present at important family moments: a child's birthday, a school play, an anniversary dinner, or a well-earned family vacation. These are the moments that anchor our priorities so that even in the thickest of battles, we do not lose sight of what we are really fighting for.

“

Once our priorities to our spouse and family are firmly established, we can expand our horizons and follow our aspirations for personal success.

Rabba Dina Brawer

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IN HONOR OF
our beloved friend, Rabba Dina Brawer

The Challenge of Memory



Rabbi Tali Adler

Class of '18

This week's parsha is full of reminders of the power of memory. Many of these memories are exclusively dark: we are commanded never to allow someone from Ammon or Moav to join the Jewish people because they would not sell us food or water when we left Egypt. We are reminded of how the Moavim hired Bilam to curse us. We are commanded never to forget what Amalek did to us when they attacked us on our way out of Egypt.

Other memories are redemptive: we are commanded to remember that we were slaves in Egypt and that God freed us. That memory, both of the slavery and the freedom, is given as the reason we may not be unjust to widows, orphans, and the poor.

There is one memory, however, that seems impossible to classify as either dark or redemptive. In perek 23, pasuk 8, (Devarim 23:8) we are commanded: "You may not hate an Egyptian, because you were a stranger in his land." In memory of the time we spent there as strangers, we are commanded never to hate them, and to allow Egyptians, after several generations, to join the Jewish people.

Most of our associations with Egypt and the Jewish people are images of suffering. Rashi, in his comment on this pasuk, highlights this suffering in the starkest possible terms: you may not despise an Egyptian even though they threw your babies into the Nile; even though you endured terrible suffering there; even though it is the paradigm for persecution. Why not? Because you were a stranger in his land. Because, Rashi explains, they hosted you in a time of dire need.

Once, generations earlier, Egypt was a place of safety for Yaakov and his family in a time of famine. And so, despite the years of persecution, we are commanded to remember that initial hospitality. We are commanded to remember the good beginning of what became the darkest story we know, and we are commanded to let that memory guide our treatment of Egyptians in the future.

We are commanded, in this mitzvah, to remember the past in all its complexity: not to forget the suffering that we endured but, at the same time, not to allow our memories to become exclusively dark. We are commanded to remember honestly. We are commanded to remember moments of beauty and kindness even as we remember suffering, persecution, and darkness.

Rosh Hashana, in addition to being the beginning of the year, is known as Yom HaZikaron, the day of memory. It is the day that we remember the past year. It is the day that we are reminded that God remembers everything, that nothing we do is ever forgotten.

There are two primary images of remembering and judgment for Rosh Hashana. The first is an image of a scale, where all the good things that we did this year are placed on one side and all the bad things we did are placed on the other. They are weighed against each other, and one side prevails: our year is characterized as good or bad. The scales are an image of the absolute. The good overpowers the bad and erases it, or vice versa.

The other image of memory on Rosh Hashana, however, provides a very different vision of what it means to remember: the image of the books. In this image, everything we do is written in a book that God keeps under His throne. While there might be more good things than bad things or, God forbid, more bad things than good, the book consists of

both. In this image, neither the bad nor the good can be erased. They are both part of our lives and experience, both indelible parts of our year.

The image of the book, much like the mitzvah of the Egyptian in this week's parsha, demands that we avoid the temptation of the scales. So often, in recounting our experiences, in thinking about our relationships, we remember them as exclusively good or exclusively bad. We forget about moments of joy and kindness in friendships and relationships that ended badly. We forget, or try to forget, about the moments of hurt or anger that are part of even our happiest days. We recast our pasts as fairy tales, with heroes and villains.

We forget that the people around us are real and complex. We forget that most of our days, no matter how joyous or sad, are composed of moments of lightness and dark. This impulse is understandable: no one wants to remember the fight they had with their child after a beautiful birthday or the kind things a former friend once did before the friendship ended. Life's complexity, its mixture of joy and sadness, can be dizzying. It is difficult to live a life without good guys and bad guys, a life where happy endings are never left untinged by sadness.

This is the challenge of the mitzvah of memory. It is the challenge to honor our experiences in all their complexity. It is the challenge of carrying the full reality of our lives. It is the challenge of acknowledging that evil and suffering are real while not allowing them to overshadow the realities of beauty and kindness.

This year, may we be brave enough to embrace the complexities of our lives and our history. This year, may we live up to the challenge of memory.

“

**We forget that most of our days,
no matter how joyous or sad,
are composed of moments
of lightness and dark.**

Rabbi Tali Adler

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(Chaika Tova bat Shimon v'Leah)

Ki Tavo

Prayer, the Fruits of Our Labor



Rabba Dr. Carmella Abraham

Class of '17

Parshat Ki Tavo begins with the laws regarding the bikkurim, the first fruits to be given by the farmer to the Kohen in the Temple and the laws of the tithes given to the Levi'im and the poor. These commandments are then followed by the following verse:

This day, the Lord your God commands you to observe all these statutes and laws; observe them faithfully with all your heart and soul (Devarim 26:16).

Midrash Tanchuma asks a simple question of this verse. Why would Moshe choose to use the words "this day" regarding the observance of the mitzvot when the commandment of bikkurim will not be applicable until much later, after the conquest of the land of Israel? The ensuing midrashic discussion yields an unexpected answer:

Moshe saw with divine intervention that the Beit Hamikdash would be destroyed and the bringing of the first fruits would be abolished. So he went ahead and instituted that Yisrael should pray three times a day, for prayer is cherished by the Holy One Blessed Is He, even more than all the good deeds and even more than all the sacrifices (Midrash Tanchuma Ki Tavo Siman 1).

Our daily prayers were established by Moshe to replace the commandment of first fruits that would no longer be performed after the Temple was destroyed. This idea is very different from the classic

rabbinical thoughts regarding the origin of daily prayer, which is that prayer originates from sacrifices or the patriarchs (See Brakhot 26b).

Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter, the Sefat Emet, enlightens us with a simple and profound thought from his grandfather, Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Alter, concerning how prayer is like the bringing of bikkurim. He explains, “My grandfather of blessed memory said that prayer was a way of giving the first of each day to God.” The Sefat Emet asserts that everything (like the first fruits) is dependent on the success of its beginnings. He then brilliantly observes that “all things from their inception require guarding and protection.”

It is transformative to think of prayer as a gift we give, multiple times a day, to God. In fact, those very prayers are more meaningful to God than good deeds. Yet, at the same time, the Sefat Emet understands the human struggle we have with our individual prayers, and he provides a formula for success. Just as the bikkurim, the first fruits from the seven species of the land of Israel, were considered fragile during their development and therefore required special attention and care, so too do our prayers. Our prayers need to be tended to and nurtured often so that each time we offer them to God, they can deepen and grow.

As we engage in self-reflection, repentance, and renewal, meaningful prayer has the power to change us, but only with the recognition that our tefillah requires ongoing attention and constant maintenance. The midrashic idea that God cherishes our prayers inspires us to strive harder and to continue to meet God in conversation.

“

**It is transformative to think
of prayer as a gift we give,
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Rabba Dr. Carmella Abraham

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Lavina and George Abraham z”l**

It is Very Close to You



Rabbanit Dr. Tamar Ron Marvin

Class of '24

There are blockbuster parshiot, like Ki Tisa, which includes the Revelation, the sin of the golden calf, and the breaking of the tablets of the Ten Commandments. Then there are those parshiot that are harder to connect with, like Tazria, which involves ritual impurity and a mysterious spiritual/physical skin ailment. Nitzavim is somewhere in between: a sleeper hit parsha. It starts with blessings and curses, although it doesn't get the distinction of being the tochecha. But I'd like to make the case that Nitzavim is a parsha that speaks uniquely, if quietly, to the human condition.

As the parsha opens, Moshe continues his long farewell speech on Arvat Moav, the plains of Moav, across from where Bnei Yisrael are about to cross the Yarden River into the Promised Land. He calls the people to enter into a brit, a covenant. But he doesn't only call the people present before him. He emphasizes that everyone is included, from the tribal elders and elected officials to young children (tafchem) and from the wood chopper to the water bearer (Devarim 29:10). For a text known for its economy of language, we're invited to reflect on the specificity of these terms and the importance of inclusivity. The Torah continues:

Not with you alone am I establishing this covenant today, rather with those who are present today before Hashem our God and those who are not here with us today (Devarim 29:13).

So what Moshe is saying here implicates all Jews for all times into all future generations.

Nitzavim also contains a passage of stunning power, one of the most radical set of verses, I'd submit, in our Torah:

"This commandment which I am commanding you today is not too wondrous for you, nor far from you; It is not in the heavens, so that you should say, 'Who will ascend skywards to get it for us, so we can hear it and do it?' Nor is it across the ocean, so that you should say, 'Who will cross these waters and get it for us, so that we can hear it and do it?' Because it is very close to you; it is in your mouth and your heart to do it" (Devarim 20:11-14).

Despite the power of these verses, the commentaries are largely silent on them. They allow these words to speak for themselves. Rashi only says that even if the Torah was in heaven, you'd actually have to climb up there and get it. Ibn Ezra laconically comments that "it's not in the heavens" is an example of "it's not too wondrous for you." Ralbag, the acronym of R. Levi ben Gershom, who lived in Provence in the 14th century, only makes the point that "not in the heavens" means we don't need prophets to act as intermediaries for us to access Torah.

Later in his commentary, though, Ralbag offers a remarkable observation on this verse:

Nistarot—concealed things—concern Hashem our God, while ha-niglot—the revealed things—concern us and our children to forever do them, all the words of this Torah (Devarim 29:28).

In other words, Torah is not in the heavens but right here in our hearts. Ralbag is often known as a kind of radical rationalist, a person who placed great importance and honor upon the intellectual

capacities of the human being. He commented on this verse that

This is among the greatest principles before the Torah: that God did not command us only to perform the words of the Torah based on explicit things, which we are commanded to do in all generations and for all time, since there are also implicit things in the words of the Torah: namely, the reasons that...inspire the commandments.

So, on the one hand, we are commanded—all of us, through the generations—to perform certain commandments explicitly. We blow shofar. We say kiddush. We build a sukkah. But there are also inner meanings, hidden reasons why we do these things. Ralbag continues:

These [reasons] are not something that it is possible to know in their entirety, except for God alone.

The reasons are there, but they are beyond our capacity to know, at least in their full, rich panoply of meaning. We shouldn't despair of the reasons, even as we accept that they are ultimately beyond our grasp. On this reading, the "hidden things" are beyond—higher than—the "revealed things." The implicit, inner meaning trumps the explicit, outer behavior. And yet, Ralbag says:

It is this [limitation] that protects the human being from transgression in a detail of the commandment, lest one think that they have already accomplished the point of the mitzvah according to the Torah and has no need to perform that particular commandment (Comment on Devarim 29:28).

It is not enough to know; we must also, even against the existential gap of knowledge, continue to act. We must do. And, in this regard, the explicit trumps the implicit, the reason or meaning behind it: in Ralbag's concluding words, "So that no one will say

that the Torah's words are merely theoretical (implicit), and not accomplished by means of action (the explicit)."

Holding these two things in tension is crucial: the commitment to do, even in the face of unknown meaning, with the security that that meaning is real. In this way, we can hold space for what we cannot know without losing ourselves in the void. The nistarot, the implicit or concealed things, can only be found on the way through the niglot, the explicit or revealed things, which are the mitzvot we, embodied beings, enact. We must act and do; only through the process and the experience can we proceed deeper into the secrets of the Torah.

“

**Torah is not in the heavens
but right here in our hearts.**

Rabbanit Dr. Tamar Ron Marvin

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Vayeilekh

Hitbodedut Versus Hakhel



Rabbi Atara Cohen

Class of '20

We often isolate ourselves when we seek profound religious experiences. Many of us feel most spiritual when we are alone, preferably with a quiet forest or a stunning mountainous sunset vista. Hitbodedut, the act of isolating oneself, perhaps taking a walk with God, is a popular and powerful religious practice. This practice seems intuitive because we can hear our thoughts most clearly, or clear our minds of thought more easily, without the noise of others. Even more than being alone, loneliness can be a bittersweet way of connecting to God. Through our longing for another, we find the divine. But with the help of the Meor V'Shemesh, an 18th-century Hasidic thinker, we can complicate this picture.

The Meor V'Shemesh challenges our romantic ideas of individual spirituality. In the teshuva season, we might think that we can repair our relationship with God most effectively when we are alone with God. The Meor V'Shemesh disagrees:

And when it appears to her that hitbodedut will awaken her heart to return and cleave to God more than a group of loved ones and attentive friends, for [she believes that] the society of friends separates her from her cleaving, even so it is more appropriate and right to hold onto the strength of the love of friendship and bring them close to God's path, because through this she can continue the enlightenment for a long time through her bringing them close to God's work, while hitbodedut only works temporarily.

According to the Meor V'shemesh, even if we feel like we do our most excellent, tear-inducing teshuva when we are alone, we are wrong. Of course this teshuva works, but it is only temporary. Only when we do teshuva with other people can we help others in their own work with God and do lasting teshuva.

In Parashat Vayelekh, the Meor V'shemesh concretizes his vision for communal teshuva and offers a vision for how to continue our spiritual practices beyond the teshuva season. He wonders about the ritual of hakhel, the once-in-seven-years event when the entire nation gathers on Sukkot to hear the recitation of the book of Devarim. Why does the entire nation need to be present? He states:

And it seems that it hints with this that the fundamental root of the roots of worship is the love of Israelites for one another, from their smallest to their greatest. Even the people who turn from the good path—love the good things found in them, and seek their goodness and pray for them for what they lack, and teach them to love each other.

Hakhel, the long-awaited Torah experience, must happen in community because we can do divine work most effectively with others. By cultivating my love for even my not-so-great neighbor, I must seek out the good in her and lead her back towards goodness. Notably, the Meor V'Shemesh's example of how I can improve others is to "teach them to love each other." Love for one another is the prerequisite for proper Torah engagement.

Even if I think that I am so good that I can learn better on my own, that my lonely spiritual wanderings are so powerful, I am actually lesser without others. My love for my fellow Jew is far more important than feeling even the most intense feelings towards God or myself when I am separated from others.

“

**Love for one another
is the prerequisite
for proper Torah
engagement.**

Rabbi Atara Cohen

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Benjamin Koren z"l
and Charles Cohen z"l

Ha'azinu

Torah and Poetry



Rabbanit Nomi Kaltmann

Class of '23

He said: I will hide My countenance from them, and see how they fare in the end. For they are a treacherous breed, children with no loyalty in them (Devarim 32:20).

This week's parsha, Ha'azinu, provides an exceptional case study in poetry. Almost the entire parsha is taken up by Moshe's recitation of a poem, which is reflected in the way the Torah displays the columns of text, differentiating Moshe's words from the majority of the Torah text.

The Torah contains other poems, such as Shirat HaYam, the poem recited by Moshe when the people of Israel go free from Egypt. In that case, which features a distinctive format, it makes sense that the Torah would want to highlight the miraculous nature of the splitting of the sea. It is one of the most important moments in the history of the Jewish people, and at the moment the sea splits, when the poem is recited, the people of Israel have just witnessed a major miracle.

While Shirat HaYam incorporates a beautiful message of gratitude to God for the people of Israel's salvation, Ha'azinu is decidedly less positive. Moshe refers to the people of Israel as a "treacherous breed," rendering this poem neither comforting nor reassuring.

So, what is the purpose of the poem in Ha'azinu? Why is this message delivered in poetry?

Ibn Ezra offers a form of explanation when he states that, in the future, if bad things befall the people of Israel, they will be able to look at Ha'azinu and

understand the reasons for these misfortunes because of the warnings inherent in Moshe's poem.

In a fascinating shift, Gemara Nedarim 38a, suggests that not only is Ha'azinu a poem, but that the whole Torah is a poem.

The Netziv, Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, in the introduction to his book Ha'amek Davar, notes the following about poetry:

However, we still have to understand how the whole Torah could be called a poem! Surely it is not written in the language of poetry. Rather, the answer is that Torah has in it the nature and the richness of poetry.

The language of the Torah is not always straight-forward. Each word is deliberate, Divine, and has a deeper meaning that requires extra thought and interpretation. To truly understand Torah, one must become deeply familiar with each word, studying it intently, and, through this process, extract the deeper principles found within the text.

Additionally, the Torah contains all kinds of allusions and hints that must be teased out. Each letter is important, and so to understand the deepest and most important messages of the Torah, one must examine it closely. This is the same principle we apply to understanding poetry. The meaning of a poem can grow as you become more familiar with each letter and word. The more you study it, the more new meanings can spring to light.

Torah, like poetry, contains the beauty of the written word. It invites the reader to delve into the depths and examine what the language is telling us and what it is seeking to convey. When we apply a close reading, we immerse ourselves in the words and become connected to their deeper meaning.

Just like the Torah, poetry has a deeper, more mysterious meaning that can only be unveiled the more we delve into the text. The possibilities for

meaning go on and on, and as we master each new facet, we become amazed at the richness of the meaning.

So, when Moshe calls Ha'azinu the "witness" of the Jewish people, we understand it to mean a witness to the eternal pursuit of trying to conquer the text and understand its meaning. The poetry here need not be triumphant or celebratory; the fact that it is deep and symbolic, with a message for all time, justifies Moshe's speech being presented as poetry.

Just like poetry, nothing in the Torah is simple, and so we seek out meaning through our engagement and interaction with the text in order to move beyond the basic meaning and find deeper, more lasting truths.

“

**Torah, like poetry,
contains the beauty of
the written word.**

Rabbanit Nomi Kaltmann

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On Writing and Dying with Tears



Rabbi Dr. Erin Leib Smokler

Director of Spiritual Development
Class of '18

In the final verses of the final chapter of the Torah, Moshe, beloved leader of Israel, dies.

At the peak of Mt. Nevo, Moshe glimpses what he will never see up close, the Promised Land. Its glory laid out before him, he bears witness to the near-fulfillment of the ancient dream but is withheld from experiencing it. "You shall not cross over there," he is reminded one last time. And then he expires.

The last eight verses of the Torah, written in third-person voice to describe the scene after Moshe's death, pose a challenge to those who read all five books as the dictate of God to Moshe. Who wrote these verses? Since they give an accounting of Moshe's death, how could he have written them? And how then can the integrity and holiness of the Torah be maintained?

Referencing the Talmud and Midrash, Rashi offers some answers to these questions:

Moshe wrote up to that juncture, and Yehoshua wrote from then on. Says Rabbi Meir: But is it possible that the Torah Scroll would be lacking anything at all, and yet Scripture states (Devarim. 31:26), "Take this Torah Scroll" [and Moshe commanded this to the Levi'im; so, according to the above opinion, is it possible that the Torah Scroll referred to there was an incomplete one, up to the juncture of Moshe's death? This cannot be!] Rather, [continues Rabbi Meir, we must say that] The Holy One, blessed is He, dictated this [i.e., the verses

"And Moshe... died there" and beyond], and Moshe wrote it in tears [BT Baba Batra 15b, Sifrei 33:34] (Rashi, Devarim 34:5).

According to the Talmud, R. Judah (some say R. Nechemiah) stipulated that the last verses of the Torah were written not by Moshe but by Yehoshua, his successor. After the death of Moshe, someone else had to take up his pen. On account of this, many legal thinkers view the last eight verses of the Torah as less holy, and several halakhot reflect that diminished status.

But it is R. Meir's position that I'd like to explore. The last words of the Torah were indeed dictated by God and scribed by Moshe, they say. But not (only) in ink, as was everything else. Rather, they were written in tears. Ever the teacher and leader, Moshe performed one last heartbreaking mission before his death. He recorded his own end.

To Rashi and the Ritva, Moshe was overcome by anguish at the prospect of his own demise. He wrote what he needed to write prophetically, but he did so overwhelmed by sorrow. He could write but could not speak its content, as he did with the other parts of the Torah.

"God would say": Moshe would repeat what God said to ensure that he was not mistaken and then he would write down [what he heard]." "Thereafter, Moshe wrote in tears": He did not repeat God's word [he could only write them down] out of anguish (Rashi, BT Menachot 30a).

Another view, offered by early Hasidim as well as the Vilna Gaon—not a common pairing—is that the word "dimot" ("tears") can also refer to mixtures, in this case jumbles of letters not yet intelligible. Moshe thus did not write through tears but through confusion.

Our rabbis taught (BT Bava Batra 15a) that the eight final verses of the Torah were written by Moshe in tears. I heard in the name of the great rabbi, our leader the Baal Shem Tov z"l, that "dema" (tears) actually refers to mixtures, as is known from the Talmud (BT Gittin 52b) [which uses the phrase] "ha'me-damea" referring to something that contains mixtures. The holy Torah [of Moshe] was not missing a single letter, only during his lifetime, they were in different arrangements (Sefer Baal Shem Tov al HaTorah, V'Zot Habrakha).

The final verses were dictated to Moshe as scrambled letters. It was only after his death that the letters fell into their rightful place.

The final opinion, by Rabbi David Tzi Hoffman (1843–1921), was that Moshe's tears functioned as "invisible ink." They made an imprint on the Torah, but they would need to be revealed and reinforced over time. The necessary act post-mortem was not to unscramble letters already written but to render readable that which existed only as a hint.

All of these interpretations suggest profound lessons embedded in these last lines of the Torah.

To those who say that Moshe cried his way through to the end, it seems that Moshe left an important legacy of tears. After all the talk "face to face," the promises, the stories, the agonies, and the miracles, the greatest lesson that Moshe models is how to cry with God, how to render oneself raw and vulnerable and real. The rabbis of the Talmud say, "Every gate has been locked except for the gates of tears" (BT Bava Metzia 59a). Standing at that gate, Moshe teaches us in his final moments that no matter where one finds oneself; no matter how despairing one might feel; no matter how close one lies to the end, God hears, though He might not heed, the tears of those who call to Him.

To those who see confusion, Moshe's final lesson is about the radical instability of text. At the end of a book that announces itself as static, we are exhorted

to see that it is instead essentially dynamic. What made sense in one constellation of words or circumstances might give way to new interpretation. The letters can dance and play and move. And we must insist that they continue to do so.

Finally, to those who imagine tears imprinted subtly into parchment, it seems that the Torah did not actually end with the death of Moshe. It instead left us with an invitation to continue the story. We must find a way to fill in the outlines left by our great teacher as we each take our place in the unfolding Jewish story.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks articulates these sentiments well. He writes:

[T]he Baal Shem Tov said that the Jewish people is a living Sefer Torah, and every Jew is one of its letters... I did not come from nowhere; I have a past, and if any past commands anyone, this past commands me. I am a Jew because only if I remain a Jew will the story of a hundred generations live on in me. I cannot be the missing letter in the scroll (Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, A Letter in a Scroll, p. 39, 47).

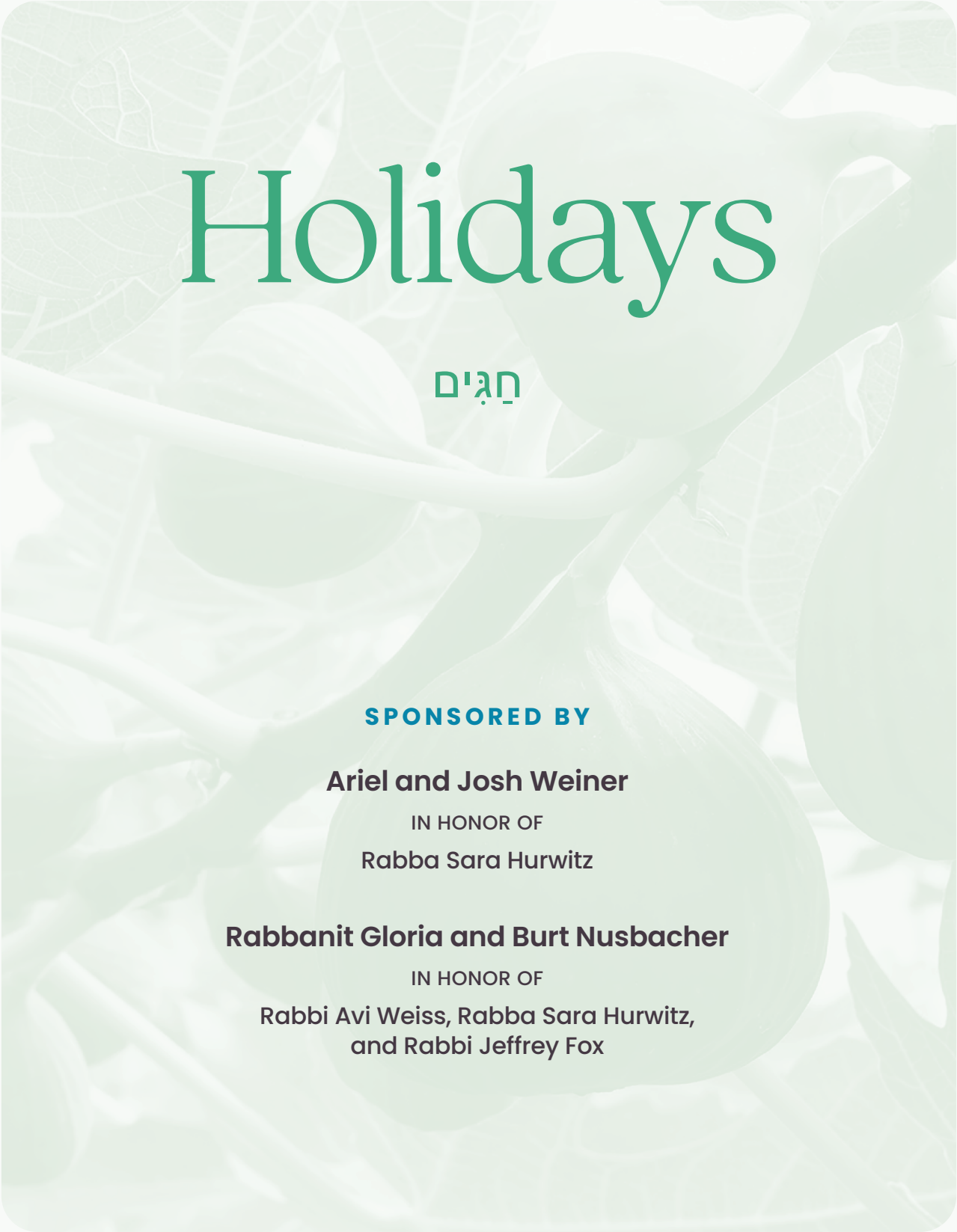
Moshe remains a teacher until the very end, showing us all the power of tears, the instability of written text, and the importance of continued participation in our story. From this ending that is not an ending, we return to the beginning to start all over again.

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the brave leaders of Maharat and
its students and graduates. We are
grateful to you for bringing light
and leadership to Klal Yisrael.



The background of the entire page is a light green, semi-transparent image of a green apple and its leaves. The apple is positioned in the upper right quadrant, and several leaves are scattered around it, some overlapping the apple and others in the foreground. The overall tone is fresh and natural.

Holidays

חגים

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Rosh Hashana

Starting the New Year Awake



Rabba Rachel Kohl Finegold

Class of '13

There is a well-known custom not to take a nap on Rosh Hashana. One common understanding is that the way a person acts on Rosh Hashana indicates the way the rest of her year will go, and we certainly don't want to have a "sleepy" (i.e. lazy) year. Other reasons include the fact that it is inappropriate to slumber while judgment is being passed. So each Rosh Hashana, after a long morning service and a large holiday meal, many of us find ourselves trying to fight off the inevitable Rosh Hashana afternoon snooze.

Skeptics may see this custom as mere superstition. Could one action, an innocent nap, really have cosmic, long-lasting effects on one's year? Still, there seems to be an endless array of dos and don'ts on Rosh Hashana, with the assumption that what happens on Rosh Hashana spills over into the year. The Talmud Yerushalmi (Horayot 12a) records specific foods that one should eat as an omen for a good year: gourds, fenugreek, leeks, beets, and dates. Over the centuries, other culinary customs have developed, such as eating a pomegranate or a sheep's head, and not consuming nuts. The Chasidic master Rebbe Pinchas of Koretz insisted that one should not eat sour foods on Rosh Hashana lest our faces become grimaced or distorted, which would then be engraved in our faces—and our lives—for the rest of the year.

It may seem like a bit much. But chances are that even the greatest skeptic, who may be happily napping on Rosh Hashana afternoon, has adopted the symbolic action of dipping apples in honey. Do

we really think that eating a certain food or doing a specific action will magically deliver us a good year?

Psychologists have discovered something counterintuitive. We might assume that behaviors follow emotions. In other words, if I feel a certain way or have a specific attitude about something, then I will enact a behavior that is consistent with that emotion.

However, research has shown that it often works in the opposite direction; once you enact a behavior, the emotion will follow. This is known as the James-Lange theory of emotion. Proponents of this theory assert that if I am depressed, I shouldn't wait to feel better to go out and engage with the world. Rather, by going out and engaging with the world, I will feel better. This is one empirically supported approach to treating chronic depression.

In other words, we do not only smile as a result of being happy; rather, if we smile more, we will become happier people.

This implies that our behaviors or actions in some way seep through our skin and into our psyches. What begins with a new action might end with a new attitude. An external behavior, even artificially created, can yield an internal result. In this way, our actions can change our internal reality. If we focus on behaving the way we want to be, then those behaviors will become who we truly are.

Judaism is an action-based religion. We focus on fulfilling mitzvot, performing ritual, and bettering the world around us. As we are taught in Pirkei Avot (1:17), "The essential thing is not study, but deed." We try to spend our lives focusing on our external actions, for those will lead to true internal change.

Rosh Hashana is the day to act like our ideal selves, to enact the way we hope that we will be throughout the year. If we eat specific foods on Rosh Hashana, it is in order that we may actualize these traits in our lives. If we refrain from sleeping, it is

because we want to be more "awake" in our lives every day.

It is not that these activities will magically bring about a new reality during the year. They do, however, have the potential for helping us become who we hope to be. And it is not just the food and the sleep: if I want to be kinder this year, I should do something kind on Rosh Hashana. If I want a deeper spiritual life, I should focus on developing that quality on the first day of the year. And perhaps, if I'd like to commit to getting more sleep this year, I should take a nice long nap on Rosh Hashana afternoon!

“

Could one action, an innocent nap, really have cosmic, long-lasting effects on one's year?

Rabba Rachel Kohl Finegold

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Rabbanit Dr. Liz Shayne

Dean of Academics

Class of '21

When I was a child, I used to count down the number of pages between the first page of the musaf amidah on Yom Kippur and my favorite piyut. I loved, and still love, Mareh Kohen, and I am not alone. Other people in my shul talk about looking forward to it and, in college, it was one of the highlights of Yom Kippur davening for everyone. My early interest in the poem primarily lay in the refrain:

“Truly how splendid was the High Priest, as he came out of the Holy of Holies in peace, without harm” (Translation from the Koren/Sacks Machzor pub. 2012).

That was the fun part to sing, after all. The stanzas were said by the chazzan, so I paid them less attention than they were due. The time has come to rectify that.

Like many of the piyutim on the Yamim Noraim, Mareh Kohen is an alphabetic acrostic, which means it has 22 stanzas that progress in order from aleph to tav. Each of those stanzas suggests a simile for the appearance of the High Priest after he emerges, unharmed, from the Holy of Holies. The figurative language covers a wide range: he is said to look like everything from a lily peering out among the thorns to the planet Venus rising in the morning sky to Moshe Rabbeinu hiding while God passed before him. Many of these comparisons seem to be inspired by the description of the Kohen Gadol in Chapter 50 of the book of Ben Sira, but the paytan, the author of the piyut, expands significantly on those five verses.

Because Mareh Kohen is an acrostic, the similes are organized alphabetically rather than by topic. It is, however, possible to rearrange them into four distinct categories of experiences to which the appearance of the Kohen Gadol may be compared. The first category is of celestial phenomena, such as the sky, the rainbow, and the morning star (Venus) on the horizon. The second consists of religious experiences, such as the appearance of angels and Moshe's encounter with God. The third group brings together the accoutrements of royalty, such as crowns, military commanders, and rooms of azure and violet. Finally, the fourth category describes moments of sudden beauty amid the ordinary, such as the rose at the heart of the garden, the light in the windows at night, and the grace of a groom on his wedding day.

When a poem appears to get carried away with its use of figurative language, it is because the poem is trying to convey an emotional experience. Each of our four categories describes something else about the Kohen Gadol's reappearance—not merely what he looked like but what the moment felt like. Each of these categories is trying to capture different facets of the experience.

To start with the first category, what are these depictions of celestial phenomena trying to convey? Along with the sky, rainbow, and Venus mentioned above, the piyut includes the sunrise and the constellations Orion and the Pleiades. These stanzas describe the sense of visual anticipation. The same way one looks carefully at the clouds after the rain, one waits with bated breath for the Kohen Gadol to appear. Waiting for him is both like waiting for the sun to rise, with the expectation it will happen, and waiting for the morning star to appear, knowing that it might not this time. Above all, the Kohen Gadol in this series of similes is something majestic one watches from a distance. The second category adds a sense of religious awe

to our experience. Comparing the Kohen Gadol to the lightning that shines forth from the face of an angel might seem counterintuitive. After all, isn't the purpose of a simile to learn about something by comparing it to a more familiar thing? The paytan, writing some time between the 3rd and 5th centuries, instead links the experience of seeing the Kohen Gadol to receiving prophecy. Through these varied analogies, the purpose of the simile shifts. Rather than focusing on appearance, these similes focus on encountering God. And though we do not have immediate access to either experience, we can understand and imagine the religious importance of both. The piyut emphasizes that the occasion is not merely beautiful and splendid but also religious. The awesomeness of the occasion is like being in the presence of God.

But, as the third category of similes explores, the experience is also beautiful and splendid. Rooms of royal purple, golden bells, crowns, and grand armor are all part of how the piyut refers to grandeur on a more human scale than that of the stars. The Kohen Gadol and the trappings of royalty are, in their own way, a closer and more relatable metaphor for how he is perceived. Emerging from the Holy of Holies, the Kohen Gadol carries God's kingship the way a king is marked by his crown. Taken in conversation with the first category, celestial glory and material glory inform how we imagine the moment, and the paytan urges us to draw on both to understand what it might have been like to be there.

In the last category, the piyut likens the Kohen Gadol to a lamp that gleams out from between windows and a lily among thorns, capturing the sense of surprise and joy that the experience entails. There's no guarantee of light in the darkness, just like the Kohen's fate hangs in the balance until he is seen. But the relief at seeing the lamp, or the joy at finding a blossom among the thorns, is transformative. There is, however, another kind of beauty amid the ordinary. The chesed that lights up the face of a groom on his wedding day is neither unexpected nor unwarranted, but it is

sudden in the transformation it enacts. Being in the Holy of Holies is, in its own way, like being in love. The Jewish people are often called God's beloved, and presenting the Kohen Gadol wearing the face of a man transformed by love emphasizes the ways in which Yom Kippur can also be a day to celebrate what the future holds.

Although one can tease out similarities among these similes, the beauty of the alphabetic structure lies in how it jumbles them together so that even the experience of the language is a bit overwhelming, much like the experience in the Temple probably was. Seeing the Kohen Gadol emerge cannot be described in prose, and so the paytan turns to poetry to capture his feelings about what it must have been like. It should not come as a surprise that the two times of year that are the most emotional and fraught, Tisha B'Av and the Yamim Noraim, are the times when we turn to liturgical poetry to express our indescribable feelings.

On this and every Yom Kippur, it is my hope that we allow the words and music of the liturgy, in whatever language we read them, to bring us not merely to repentance but to experience the day in such a way that we can look around say, in the words of the paytan, "truly how splendid."

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Sukkot

The Power of Simplicity



**Rabbanit Tamar Green
Eisenstat**

Class of '23

When we celebrate Hoshana Rabba, the seventh and final day of the festival of Sukkot, we carry out a special mitzvah called “chibbut arava,” in which we wave and beat branches of willow (arava). Rav Kook, as expounded by Rabbi Moshe-Zvi Neria in *Mo’adei HaRe’iyah*, emphasizes that when we carry out this mitzvah, we should hit with the arava, as if we are honoring it, rather than trying to destroy it. It’s somewhat puzzling, however, why the arava was selected for this lofty mitzvah; why not select the long and elegant lulav, which would be ideal for waving around, rather than the diminutive willow branch?

The answer, according to Rav Kook, lies in Bavli Sukkah 43b, where a story is told of a Second Temple-era dispute between the Rabbis and the Boethusians (a sectarian priestly group), regarding the Temple mitzvah of bringing aravot to adorn the altar on Hoshana Rabba. The Rabbis held that if Hoshana Rabba fell on a Shabbat (which no longer happens under our current Jewish calendar), then aravot should still be brought to the altar. The Boethusians, by contrast, held that bringing aravot to the altar on Shabbat is a violation of Shabbat and should absolutely not be done.

One year, when Hoshana Rabba and Shabbat fell on the same day, matters came to a head when the clever Boethusians hid all of the Temple’s aravot under a large rock on Shabbat eve. This act would have prevented the priests from being able to use the aravot since moving a rock on Shabbat violates the rabbinic prohibition of muktzeh. If they instructed

the priests to move the large rock to get to the aravot, then the priests would be violating muktzeh, but if they did not instruct the priests to remove the rock, then the priests would be unable fulfill the mitzvah of adorning the altar with aravot. By consequence, the Jewish people would then erroneously come to believe that the Rabbis agreed with the Boethusians' position that aravot should not be brought to the altar when Hoshana Rabba falls on Shabbat.

Incredibly, before anyone realized what the Boethusians had done, a group of "amei ha'aretz" (simple people, unlearned in the rules of muktzeh) saw the large rock on top of the aravot and immediately removed it, enabling the aravot to be used to adorn the altar. In so doing, a potentially explosive encounter between the Rabbis and the Boethusians was resolved. To commemorate what Rav Kook describes as the impulsive, uncomplicated acts of "simple people," we hit and wave with our simple arava branches on Hoshana Rabba. Yet, on reflection, what is so great about being simple? Why should we praise the "amei ha'aretz"? Weren't they just ignorant of the rules of muktzeh? Aren't we committed to immersing ourselves in intellectual as well as spiritual growth via Torah study, an anything-but-simple enterprise? To answer this question, let's turn to marshmallows.

In the famous marshmallow challenge, groups of four people were timed to see how they performed in creating a tower out of strands of spaghetti, string, tape, and a single marshmallow. The challenge was performed by groups from all different backgrounds: CEOs, architects, kindergarteners, and so on. Most surprisingly, kindergarteners outperformed CEOs and MBA graduates in this challenge. Children, with their openness, willingness to dive into play, and excitement about collaboration, remind us that there are times when simple, naive curiosity can foster problem solving at far higher levels than sophisticated acumen.

But how do we channel this childlike quality in our own lives? Are we supposed to dumb down our

intellect? Absolutely not, but neither should we allow our internal resistance to get in our way. Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav in his celebrated story "The Clever Man and the Simple Man" explains why.

In Rabbi Nachman's tale, two friends, one exceptionally clever and one very simple, start their lives on the same course. Yet each time an opportunity comes to the clever man, he overly scrutinizes it; he lets his ego, anxieties, and suspicions get in the way, and he ends up continually choosing the less desirable path, resulting in a stagnant, unfulfilled existence. By contrast, the simple man does not overly analyze each opportunity that comes his way; he is open, aware of his limitations, and humble. Through saying "yes" to all opportunities that cross his path, he ends up climbing to better and better places until he becomes advisor to the king. So for Rabbi Nachman, channeling a simple, open approach to life yields more success than overly complicated and weighty approaches.

Thus we see what we can learn from the humble arava. Quite simply: we should always try to be open; rather than overthinking our decision making, we should allow our innate curiosity to take over, quashing self doubt and anxiety in the process. This year, as we wave and beat with our aravot, we can aim to channel our childlike sense of wonder, our inner "am ha'aretz," and, in so doing, infuse this positive energy into the year ahead.

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Shmini Atzeret

Preparing for the Acharei Chaggim



Rabbi Eryn London

Class of '17

In Israel, people frequently say, “acharei hachaggim,” after the holidays. From around July until Rosh Hashana, all big projects seem to be put on hold until “acharei hachaggim.” But on Shmini Atzeret, we suddenly realize we will be “acharei hachaggim.” The next holiday we will celebrate is Hanukkah, which is over two months away.

The Netivot Shalom, a book by the Slonimer Rebbe, reminds us that this really is the “last” holiday of the year. Even though Rosh Hashana, the New Year, was only a few weeks prior, the first holiday is Pesach, way back in Nisan.

Through the Jewish calendar, we can look back at what we have gone through as a Jewish people. We left Egypt at Pesach. We received the Torah at Shavuot. We mourned the destruction of the Temple and the great losses of the Jewish people on Tisha B’Av. We started to reflect on our lives and repent in Elul. Which brings us back to Rosh Hashana, where we stood before the King of Kings in judgment, followed by confessing our sins and creating a clean slate on Yom Kippur. All too quickly, we were out in our sukkah, and, finally, we find ourselves at Shmini Atzeret, the very last chag.

Many of us are happy when we reach this date each year. The chaggim are an intense period. We have spent so much time in shul, so much time planning and cooking and hosting. In some ways, it is nice to go “back to normal,” with just Shabbat to look forward to at the end of each week.

But, at the same time, the end of this season is a bit sad and even a bit scary. There is a different feeling

in the air during the chaggim, even though it might feel overwhelming at times. The community is together more often than during the rest of the year, and we all have more time for reflection and spiritual growth. Something special happens over the holiday period and then stops abruptly. On Shmini Atzeret, we realize that the year is really starting. It is happening. The book of life has been signed and sealed.

And yet there are ways to temper our sadness or worry about returning to normal life. In Devarim, this holiday is known as the “assembly of the eighth day.” There are no special mitzvot that are connected to it. It is connected to Sukkot, as it is called “the eighth day,” but it is also its own holiday.

The Maharal of Prague explains how special the eighth is. “Eight is above all other aspects and natural things, for the number seven encompasses all natural things. For all matters of natural things are included in seven days of construction, and eight is above nature and the world. Eight includes all matters that are above nature.” Our master R. Avraham teaches that “On the eighth day” means that we completely awaken from all matters of this world. It is a hint of future redemption when there will be the final repair of the world, in the world to come, as it is written “Then your Lord will rejoice about you like a groom rejoices about his bride.”

According to Rav Bick from Yeshivat Har Etzion,

In light of the meaning of Sukkot, its inner nature is clear. On Shemini Azeret, we return to our homes. The desert too was meant to be a temporary existence. Living out directly in God's hands, without the mediacy and the challenge of making our own worlds, is a rarefied experience. It represents the highest joy, the most sublime celebration—but it is meant as a prelimi-

nary to the more prosaic but essential task of living properly, of celebrating our daily work and approach to God, from below, as one works the Land of Israel and serves God on one's own land. This is the necessary conclusion to Sukkot—you come back to this world, to your own man-made world, and remain, somehow, before God, in joy. It is, indeed, only fitting that on this day we also begin again a cycle of Torah reading, starting again another year.

Shmini Atzeret could also be seen as the “sukkot afterparty;” God wants one more day with us. Rashi seems to endorse this view, citing the parable of a king who invites his sons to dine with him for a number of days, but when the time comes for them to leave, he asks them to stay for another day since it is difficult for him to part from them.

Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch infers the meaning of the holiday from the word “atzeret,” which he renders as “to gather” or “to store up.” Accordingly, on this eighth day of Sukkot, the final day of celebration, we must store up the sentiments of gratitude and devotion acquired throughout the entire holiday season.

Similarly, Rabbi Asher Lopatin teaches:

“Atzeret” means “detaining”... We’re ending this period of holidays and pulling everything together. It fosters the intimate relationship between God and the Jewish people... As busy as God is with the whole world, God is also interested in what I’m doing. There are no special customs. No special foods. No crying. No shofar. The message is, “Just sit there and be there.”

So what is Shmini Atzeret? It is a day for us to think about everything that we just went through over the past month. It is a way for us to stop and appreciate the holiday and take in all that we can. It is an opportunity to appreciate the extra time that we have with God. It is a chance to appreciate extra

time with our friends and family as well. It is a time to appreciate the lack of routine in our lives. Today we can stop and mentally prepare ourselves for what will be coming next: for what “acharei hachaggim” will be.

“

Through the Jewish calendar, we can look back at what we have gone through as a Jewish people.

Rabbi Eryn London

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Hanukkah

Miracles in Community



Rabbi Naima Hirsch Gelman

Class of '24

Those who have either studied Masechet Shabbat or the origins of Hanukkah know that the Gemara first discusses the practical implications of lighting Hanukkah candles before explaining the reason why we actually celebrate Hanukkah. Despite having explained the ritual obligations and mechanisms around lighting Hanukkah candles, the practice of lighting candles is not part of the answer to “mai Hanukkah,” “What is Hanukkah?” (Shabbat 21b). Instead, we are told that the Rabbis established yamim tovim behallel u’hoda’ah, holidays to recite Hallel and offer thanks, in commemoration of the first Hanukkah when one cruse of oil lasted for eight days. And while the practice and imagery of Hanukkah candles are a big part of how Jews around the world celebrate the holiday, there’s more we can learn from the connection between miracles and gratitude.

The Gemara specifically mentions hallel and hoda’ah, Hallel and thanksgiving. Rashi explains that hoda’ah, thanksgiving, refers to al hanisim, the Hanukkah-themed insertion for the amidah and birkat hamazon, which belies the assumption that hallel and hoda’ah are interchangeable. Rashi’s explanation makes perfect practical sense in that there’s a difference between praising God and thanking God, and that on Hanukkah, we should do both. We thank God for enacting a miracle and praise the attributes through which She made those miracles occur. We aren’t supposed to take miracles for granted and, therefore, cannot let them occur without acknowledgment.

The connection between miracles and gratitude isn't limited to Hanukkah. In Masechet Brakhot 54a, the Gemara teaches us that we must recite brakhot of gratitude for both personal and communal miracles. In fact, the Gemara states that there is a *chiyuv*, a ritual obligation, to recite these brakhot when visiting the location in which they occurred:

The Rabbis say: On a miracle performed on behalf of the multitudes, everyone is obligated to recite a blessing; on a miracle performed on behalf of an individual, only the individual is obligated to recite a blessing.

The Gemara offers some examples of personal miracles, including surviving a lion attack, finding water while traveling, and hiding from a wild camel loose in the marketplace, which are a stark contrast to the kinds of supernatural events in its list of communal miracles such as the splitting of the Red Sea, Lot's wife turning to salt, and the defeat of Jericho. This contrast teaches us to think beyond the supernatural archetype of a miracle when looking for God's presence in our lives; the dumb luck of surviving wild animals is just as miraculous and deserving of blessing as the nature-defying feats we read about in the Torah. And while most of us have never survived an attack from a wild camel while shopping for groceries, there are definitely moments in each of our lives that seem miraculous upon reflection.

When we do survive a difficult or life-threatening situation, we recite *birkat hagomel*. The connection we make between personal miracles and the recitation of this brakha is an echo of the Gemara in Masechet Brakhot. After expounding on the specific brakhot one should recite at the sites of historical miracles, the Gemara teaches us about this recitation. It lists four categories of people—seafarers, those who “walk in the desert,” someone who recovered from illness, and someone who was freed from incarceration—who must offer thanks in the presence of a minyan. The Gemara brings a proof for the necessity of a minyan from a verse in

the Book of Psalms, but there's also something powerfully intuitive about thanking God for something personal in the presence of community.

This balance between personal and communal is brought to the fore when we celebrate Hanukkah. When we light our Hanukkah candles, we usually focus more on our individual homes and families instead of our larger communities. After all, Masechet Shabbat teaches us that the mitzvah of Hanukkah candles is specifically performed by every household. Yet the lighting of those candles is multiplied from household to household, uniting the whole Jewish community in the celebration of the miracle.

In our complicated world, we may sometimes find little room for comfort, but we can be reassured by how the Jewish community holds shared grief. When we sing Hallel and light candles, we remember that we are not alone in our grief or in our triumphs over it. There are times when we might not feel the hallel and *hoda'ah* in our lives, but we can still find strength, connection, and resilience in the miracles we continue to experience.

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IN HONOR OF
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Tu B'Shvat

From Hatchlings to Saplings



Darshanit Dr. Miriam Udel

Class of '19

The proximity of Shabbat Shira, a designation evoking the Torah's tuneful celebration of the Israelites' safely crossing the Red Sea, and Tu B'Shvat, the new year of the trees, invites us to consider subtle linkages between these two apparently coincidental liturgical occasions.

The Exodus from Egypt initiates a period of special intimacy between God and the people who are being redeemed, but it is an intimacy born of abject, unremitting dependency. The chapters following the triumphant Song at the Sea detail divine provision for immediate physical needs: the sourcing of potable water (Shemot 15:25) and edible food (Shemot 16:8, 11, 13-14). This moment-to-moment parental care, protracted throughout the decades of desert wandering, bespeaks a kind of national infancy. However long it extended, this stage was always meant to give way to subsequent maturation as far as the Sages were concerned. Surely the nation would grow up and attend to its own needs, as Vayikra Rabba (25:5) insists:

The hen, when its young are tiny, gathers them together and places them beneath its wings, warming them and grubbing for them. But when they are grown up and one of them wants to get near her she pecks it on the head and says to it: 'Go and grub in your own dunghill!' So during the forty years that Israel were in the wilderness the manna fell, and the well came up for them, the quails were at hand for them, the clouds of glory encircled them, and the pillar of

cloud led the way before them. When Israel were about to enter the Land, Moshe said to them: ‘Let every one of you take up his spade and go out and plant trees.’ Hence it is written, ‘When you shall come into the land, you shall plant’ (Vayikra 19:23).

The rabbis imagine God as that archetypal maternal caregiver: the mother hen. The avian parent, like the divine one, circumvents human language to express her love through the provident actions of guardianship. Even her eventual harshness in pecking her hatchlings is meant to prod them toward the independence of which they are newly capable. The God of Israel will eventually offer a revelation in human language, but long before that, the Holy One sets about meeting the people’s immediate needs for sustenance, protection and direction. The activity that will eventually signal their maturity, their arrival in the Land, will be the planting of trees, the token of an adult nation’s active participation in sustaining itself.

The new phase in the relationship, symbolized by planting fruit trees, might be imagined as the collaborative one between a loving parent and an adult child. For the parent, this entails some stepping back, some letting go, and watching how things fructify. For the child, it involves assuming responsibility and taking on the dignity that responsibility confers. Just as children might become parents and pay forward some of the nurturance they have received, so too the Israelites now become farmers and enter into their own sequence of intensive care and then a necessary stepping back from their seedlings.

Robert Frost brings to life the pathos of this surrender in the poem “Good-by and Keep Cold,” where a farmer frets over the manifold harms that might come to his orchard over the winter (rabbit and mouse, deer and grouse), while he must be away on “business with different trees.” Even more damaging to the fruit, though, would be a sudden thaw:

*No orchard’s the worse for the wintriest storm;
But one thing about it, it mustn’t get warm.
“How often already you’ve had to be told,
Keep cold, young orchard. Good-bye and
keep cold.
Dread fifty above more than fifty below.”*

At the moment of the Exodus, this eventual agricultural independence is just the glimmer of a dream to the newly liberated people. But the coincidence of Tu B’Svat, the rabbinic new year of the trees, with this first glimmer, is an invitation to imagine what lies ahead. In deepest winter, the sap begins to run in the veins of trees that will blossom only in spring and produce fruit in late summer. At the time of the nation’s dependent infancy, the divine Parent articulates the expectation of eventual self-sufficiency (“you shall plant”). And when that self-sufficiency eventually comes, the nature of God’s intimacy will shift to recognize the enhanced agency of the people living in their land, tilling their soil. They will plant their seeds, prune their trees, wait for the fruit, and supplicate God with the enduring affection and yearning of a child but also the newfound dignity of an adult—as Frost’s farmer does:

*I wish I could promise to lie in the night
And think of an orchard’s arboreal plight
When slowly (and nobody comes with a light)
Its heart sinks lower under the sod.
But something has to be left to God.*

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**Leah Krakinowski
and Andy Silberstein**

IN MEMORY OF
our parents z”l who modeled renewal
and growth throughout their lives

Purim

From Rules to Renewal: How Purim Can Transform



Rabbi Arielle Krule

Class of '25

I was born with a natural resistance to rules, a quality I see as deeply connected to my experience as a woman in the world. This resistance isn't just a matter of personality—it stems from navigating a world where women's agency is often questioned, constrained, or undermined. The rules I resist frequently intersect with gendered expectations that demand unhelpful conformity while silencing voices like mine. It's important that we ask questions such as: When do we uphold certain traditions simply because "that's the way things are?" What are the ways in which we need to look more closely to uncover how particular powers shape interpretations to sustain existing systems?

There is a delicate balance between adhering to the rigors of structure and engaging deeply enough with it to recognize that that structure, when approached thoughtfully, can provide greater freedom. Our job is to hold that balance. Structure, when implemented through the lens of community and inclusion, can provide grounding that enables creativity and our voices to be heard. Commitment at its best paves the way for true liberation and self-expression of our most divine selves.

Purim uniquely embodies this difficult balance between structure (keva) and inspiration (kavanah) overlaid with the challenge of participating in a system that does not always prioritize women's voices. It can feel complicated to assert a place at the table in a system that says you have no place there. Esther, a woman navigating the complexities of power in a patriarchal society, exemplifies this

experience. Her agency not only reshapes the fate of her people but also shows how women can transform systems even when constrained by them.

In Esther 9:27, we read: "The Jews undertook and irrevocably obligated themselves and their descendants, and all who might join them, to observe these two days in the manner prescribed and at the proper time each year." After their triumph over Haman, the Jewish people could have simply celebrated their freedom. Instead, they chose to take on the responsibility of honoring their victory through structure and ritual.

A similar tension between external imposition and personal embrace emerges in the Talmud's discussion in Shabbat 88a, which explores our relationship with obligation. At Sinai, the Torah was given amidst an extraordinary display of divine power. Rabbi Avdimi bar Chama bar Chasa describes the Jewish people as standing under the mountain with God holding it above them like a barrel, effectively saying, "If you accept the Torah, excellent; if not, there will be your end." This depiction emphasizes the sense of coercion at Sinai—a moment of undeniable gravity where consent was irrelevant. This conception of Sinai is all about keva.

The sage Rava, however, points to a transformative shift: during the time of Esther and Mordechai, the Jewish people willingly and joyfully re-accepted the Torah. This is expressed in Esther 9:27: "The Jews ordained, and took upon them, and upon their seed, and upon all such as joined themselves unto them." This marks a significant transition from external compulsion, which can feel oppressive, to internal embrace. True transformation happens when individuals can take ownership of the process, moving from a sense of imposed obligation to a deliberate, life-affirming choice.

This shift from a choice that wasn't really a choice to embracing the mantle of relationship and obligation offers a powerful framework for our spiritual lives. Renewal may begin as an external imposition, but true transformation blossoms when we infuse the process with intention and joy, making it wholly our own.

The theme of obligation (*chiyuv*) emerges as a crucial element of growth. Esther 9:27 emphasizes that the Jewish people took upon themselves and their descendants the responsibility to observe Purim, extending this dedication to "all who might join them." Commitments, when freely embraced, can serve as the anchors that connect us to others and to Hashem. Particularly when those commitments are recognized for their greater purpose, we can begin to see ourselves as powerful authors of our own experiences.

In his commentary on Purim, the Sefat Emet, quoting Chidushei Harim, offers insight into the imagery of unity at Sinai. He writes that at Sinai, the Jewish people stood "k'ish echad b'lev echad" (as one person with one heart), meaning that a deep, embodied unity was a prerequisite for receiving the Torah. This may also be true for us in our own re-receiving of the Torah every day. Similarly, on Purim, the Sefat Emet writes, we remind ourselves of this interconnectedness by giving of gifts to friends (*mishloach manot*) and collective fasting and prayer on Ta'anit Esther. We also do this through reading our story (*megillah*), donating to those who are less financially secure than us (*matanot l'evyonim*), and gathering to prioritize joy (*mishteh*).

On Purim, we revisit the structures and rules we might have taken for granted. The verse "And they stood to save their lives" (Esther 9:15) mirrors how Bnei Yisrael were referred to as "70 Soul" (singular) when serving Hashem, who is one. The Chidushei Harim explains that the unity at Har Sinai, expressed as *vayichan*, was a preparation for receiving the Torah. Similarly, on Purim, we look forward collectively.

It is significant to note that this rededication to Torah, mitzvot, and halakha happens through a woman. Esther is young and lacks socioeconomic privilege in a society where God's presence is not made known to her. Someone who is usually on the outside of power has the clarity to create a scenario that leads the Jewish people to recommit themselves.

As we celebrate Purim, we can take inspiration from the Jewish people's journey in the time of Esther. This holiday challenges us to reflect on how transformation occurs in our own lives. How do the commitments we uphold shape our daily choices and spiritual connections? Are there structures in your life that you once resisted but now see as sources of strength and grounding?

Esther embodies a particular form of empowerment that we need to summon when our external systems and obligations may feel imposed: reclaiming our space in a world that does not create it for us. Our transformation, just like Esther's and the Jewish people's, will come from taking the time to observe our structures and see when and where they can be deliberate choices. It means checking that our *kavanah* and *keva* are in balance.

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IN HONOR OF
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Pesach

Psalm 114: The Maggid Ends, the Earth Trembles



Rabbanit Leah Sarna

Class of '18

When we sing the poeticized order of the seder, we are led to believe that Maggid and Hallel are separated by eight other stages. In truth, the last paragraphs of the Maggid are themselves the first paragraphs of the Hallel, which is then put on pause as we say the blessing to close the Maggid and begin to eat, first the obligatory and symbolic foods of the night and then a full meal. At the close of the meal, after Barech, we continue the Hallel.

These overlapping moments between the Maggid and the Hallel have been the subject of much discussion, dating back to the arguments between Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai. This debate appears in the Mishna, but a more extended version is found in the Tosefta.

Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel agree that some amount of Hallel should be recited before the meal. Many reasons have been given for why we do this. Most compellingly, in my opinion, the Maharal suggests in *Gevurot Hashem* (5:62) that we recite some Hallel before the meal and some after because then we are truly saying Hallel on and around the consumption of the Korban Pesach (in the times when the Temple stood) and the matzah (today). The Maharal writes:

If we had only said the Hallel before or after, it would not be apparent that the Hallel is on the consumption of the Pesach.

But how do we decide how much Hallel to say before the meal? This is the debate of Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai. Dr. Joseph Tabory in *The JPS Commentary on the Haggadah* writes:

There was a fundamental difference between the houses in the understanding of the paschal meal. The Shammaites assumed that the meal was not a celebration of the Exodus but rather a reenactment of the first paschal meal. The Hillelites answered that the Shammaites were being inconsistent. According to their reasoning, they should not recite the blessing of redemption either (p. 48).

Beit Hillel, in these arguments, takes hold of the shape of the seder. We are not reenacting the night of the Passover in all of its details; we are celebrating it. Our celebration needs to feel personal and relevant, but our Maggid is a telling of the complete story, through to the end—even if, according to the original timing, the Israelites would not have left yet. And when we tell that complete story, it concludes in a particular way, with Psalm 114.

Famously, Rav Hai Gaon describes the Hallel of the whole night as song. The Ran uses this articulation as a way of justifying the division of Hallel on the seder night. This is not your standard Hallel; this is a Hallel of Song, and the rules are different. Rabbi Yitzchok Zev HaLevi Soloveitchik writes that the Hallel of Song is the Hallel of someone who has personally undergone a miraculous redemption. By the end of the Maggid, even though we are not reliving the Exodus to the minute as Beit Shammai might have liked, we have experienced a full redemption, and we are singing out our Hallel as a semi-spontaneous praise that simply cannot wait until after the meal. But, still, we are left to

wonder why our song takes the particular form of Psalm 114.

The Psalmist tells us that when Israel left Egypt, Yehuda became Hashem's special one and Hashem ruled over Israel. When that happened, the sea fled, the Jordan turned back, and the mountains and the hills began to skip. The Psalmist asks the sea and the river and the mountains and the hills about the cause for their actions—and they respond that they are trembling at the revealed presence of the Lord, who brought water out of the rock. The Psalm seems to read the story of water pouring out of the rock not only as a retelling of one of the many miracles wrought in the desert, but also as a metaphor for the Exodus, with the rock being Egypt and the water being the Israelites.

A Midrash in Midrash Tehillim adds some insight into why we end our Maggid with this Mizmor.

“When Israel went forth from Egypt.” This is related to what the verse says “Egypt rejoiced in their leaving” (Tehillim 105:38). Rabbi Berachya said: this is a parable for a fat man who was riding on a donkey. This one says “when will I get off the donkey!” and this one says “when will this get off of me!” The time came for him to get down, and I don’t know which one was happier. When David saw how happy the Egyptians were when the Israelites left Egypt, he began to praise the Exodus, and wrote “When Israel went forth from Egypt” (Midrash Tehillim (Buber) 114:1).

The Midrash compares the opening of this Psalm to a line in Psalm 105:38: The Egyptians rejoiced in their leaving. The Midrash then relays a parable in the name of Rabbi Berachya. When a fat man rides on a donkey, each one despises the journey. When the time comes for the fat man to get down, it is hard to tell who experiences more relief. King David, according to the Midrash, reflects upon the happiness of the Egyptians at the Exodus in light of this parable and then composes Psalm 114.

This Midrash can only be understood in light of Psalm 114. Psalm 114 does not sing of the relief experienced by the Israelites when they were freed from slavery. In fact, it says nothing of their emotional state. Psalm 114 rejects the parallelism expressed by Rabbi Berachya's parable. While Psalm 105 tells us of the happiness of the Egyptians, Psalm 114 speaks of unnatural events: the sea taking flight, the Jordan receding, mountains and hills skipping, the whole earth trembling. This is not the relief of the donkey or the fat man. When the Midrash imagines Psalm 114 as a response to Psalm 105, it reminds us that the Exodus was not just about the experience of the Israelites. It is about the entire earth trembling before Hashem. It is about all of existence being changed permanently by divine intervention.

When Beit Hillel mandate that we end the Maggid with Psalm 114, the reason is this: to fully celebrate the story of Yetziat Mitzrayim, we need to broaden our perspective beyond our attempts to re-enact the human experience of our ancestors. Beit Shammai would have had our seders limited to that project. That is why the Shammaites wanted to end the Maggid with Psalm 113, a Psalm that speaks of the Israelites becoming eved Hashem, servants of God, and focuses on joyful human transitions (“He raises the poor from the dust” for example) as if that were the primary effect of the Exodus. Beit Hillel respond with a different model, wherein the story of the Maggid ends with a wider perspective, joyfully recognizing in our Hallel of Song that Yetziat Mitzrayim was not just about the Jews but about the entire earth, waters and mountains, being changed through divine intervention.

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Shavuot

A Celebration of Female Friendship



Rabba Wendy Amsellem

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of Beit Midrash Program
Class of '18

It is hard to find a conversation in the Bible between two women. Sarah and Rivka never speak to another woman in Bereishit. Rachel and Leah speak with one another just once. Dina, Yaakov's daughter, never speaks at all. In the Book of Esther, Esther speaks often, and with power, but never to another woman. Against this background, the Book of Ruth stands out as a celebration of female friendship.

As the book begins, Naomi does not see the value in women's relationships. She urges her daughters-in-law to leave her, noting bitterly, "Why should you go with me? Have I any more sons inside of me who can be husbands for you?" (Ruth 1:11). In the next verses, she points out that even if she were to conceive sons that night, it would not make sense for the daughters-in-law to wait until the babies had grown to marrying age. Naomi understands her relationship to her daughters-in-law as existing only by virtue of their connection to her sons. Since her sons have died and she has no other sons who could be potential husbands, Naomi believes that she has nothing to offer the younger women.

Orpah heeds her mother-in-law's advice and returns home. Ruth, though, is determined to stick with Naomi. She declares her loyalty in a powerful, poetic speech that has become a timeless testimony of devotion. She promises, "Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people are my people; and your God is my God" (Ruth 1:16). Ruth tells Naomi that she does not want to be with

her because of any potential suitors that Naomi can provide. Instead, Ruth explains that she just wants to be with Naomi, now, forever, until death separates them.

Naomi seems not to know what to make of Ruth's dedication. She walks on in silence as the two women make their way to Bethlehem. Upon their arrival, Naomi declares, "I left here full, but God has returned me empty" (Ruth 1:20–21). Despite Ruth's pledge of love and loyalty, Naomi does not even acknowledge Ruth's presence.

As the story progresses, Ruth continues to demonstrate her devotion to Naomi. Disregarding the danger, she goes out on her own to glean in the fields for barley for Naomi. When Boaz offers her lunch, she carefully saves some of the food to bring back to Naomi (Ruth 2:18). She cares for the older woman, making Naomi's comfort and security paramount and she seems to want nothing in exchange other than Naomi's company.

Naomi, though, continues to understand her value to Ruth as connected to her ability to provide Ruth with a husband. She constructs a plan where Ruth will surprise Boaz in the middle of the night on the threshing-floor in an attempt to persuade Boaz to marry her. Ruth has not evinced any particular interest in Boaz, but, keen to make Naomi happy, she responds that she will do whatever Naomi asks her to do (Ruth 3:5). Boaz turns out to be amenable and he sends Ruth home in the morning with six measures of barley. When Ruth returns to Naomi, she presents the barley to her, saying, "He gave me these six measures of barley, for he said that I should not come empty to [you]." This is an important moment. We have no evidence in the text that Boaz intends the barley for Naomi. It seems instead that because Ruth is always thinking of Naomi, she understands any gift as a gift for Naomi. In addition, the language of not coming empty to Naomi recalls Naomi's painful statement upon her return to Bethlehem that God has brought her back empty. Ruth is aware of Naomi's emptiness and she is trying her hardest to fill the void.

By the middle of chapter 4, Ruth and Boaz have married and Ruth has given birth to a son. This could be understood as a validation of Naomi's worldview. She has proved valuable to Ruth by providing Ruth with a husband and a son. The chorus of women in the town, though, understand the events in a different manner. They say to Naomi, "[This baby] will revive you and sustain your old age because your daughter-in-law who loves you bore him, she who is better to you than seven sons" (Ruth 4:15). The women urge Naomi to recognize that the primary person in her life is Ruth. Through Ruth's love and devotion, Naomi has been redeemed and made full. Ruth is important not because she has provided Naomi with a son but because of the way she herself cares for Naomi. In this way, the women of Bethlehem, and the author of the Book of Ruth, honor the relationship between Ruth and Naomi. The final verses may be about the male genealogy leading to King David, but the principal drama of the story resides in the power of the friendship of the two women.

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Comfort, Discomfort, and Distress



Rabbanit Dr. Liz Shayne

Dean of Academics

Class of '21

Were I so inclined, I could make the argument that the nine days from the beginning of Av and specifically the fast of Tisha B'Av are surprisingly suited to a very particular kind of autistic person. The custom observed by many to refrain from listening to any music minimizes sensory overload. Some of us will just forget to eat and drink for an entire day anyway. Any excuse to avoid wearing uncomfortable shoes, when all shoes are uncomfortable; to sprawl on the floor rather than sit still in a chair; and escape from taking a shower when showering is a sensory nightmare is practically a gift. And, of course, there can be deep relief of knowing that no one in shul will be wearing perfume when you are sensitive to smells.

I suspect that autistic readers of these words are probably either laughing or screaming at the absurdity of suggesting that this time of year is easy. While it is true that some autistic Jews may appreciate the lower seats or the freedom from ambient noise, others will be distressed by those sensory changes. Moreover, the actual prohibition on eating and drinking is much more likely to be perceived as intolerable, especially for those who already struggle with food and regulation. The problem, however, is that this might be a sign of the restrictions working as intended. After all, these restrictions are designed to make everyone less comfortable. Yet it can be difficult to articulate the distinction between the right and the wrong kind of discomfort.

The section on laws and customs of the nine days in the Shulchan Arukh opens with the following

statement: "When the month of Av begins, we minimize our happiness" (OC 551:1). This is the opposite of a statement many may be familiar with from the month of Adar, when we say that we maximize our happiness as the month begins. Understandably, there is no catchy tune this time around. Instead, we are left with a list of restrictions designed to evoke a state of mourning and prevent the happiness that comes from being comfortable. In order for the customs of both Adar and Av to make sense, we must exist at a baseline level of contentment that is neither deeply joyous nor despondent. There must be space to increase happiness to make room for Adar as well as space to decrease it to allow for the mourning rituals of Av. But it is important to note that decreasing happiness does not mean increasing pain. Even for Yom Kippur, when the Torah tells us that we should afflict ourselves, the Talmud is very clear that this refers to the five specific forms of affliction that come from refraining from enjoyment: no eating and drinking, no bathing, no wearing shoes, no having sex, and no putting on creams or ointments. There is, the Talmud emphasizes, no mitzvah to deliberately cause anguish to oneself by sitting in extreme heat or cold (BT Yoma 74b). The same is true for Tisha B'Av: mourning rituals are designed to remove pleasures, even necessary ones, as part of diminishing happiness. They are not supposed to actively cause pain.

Unfortunately, many autistic people do not exist at this baseline level of comfort. Even leaving aside how often we are asked to be in public spaces that cause sensory stress, many of us are careful with hygiene, music, and how often we do laundry precisely because our baseline is not an absence of pleasure but the presence of distress. To be autistic in a neurotypical world is often to be distressed, and we do our best to structure our world to mitigate that pain. The figure who seems to speak to this experience in the Talmud is the

istinis, a term translated as anything from sensitive to weak or fragile. The word itself is likely derived from the Greek *asthenia*, weakness. The *istinis*, for example, is allowed to wash in hot water even when the custom is, for reasons of deprivation or mourning, that one wash only using lukewarm water. What is seen as an enjoyable luxury to some is a necessity to the *istinis* because deprivation, in their case, could lead to real harm rather than simply a pleasure deferred.

The figure of the *istinis* is critical for those of us looking for halakhic language that describes our own experiences because the *istinis* is about a person's nature, not necessarily about whether they are currently ill. Halakha has always been aware of the ways that illness interferes with one's ability to fulfill halakhic obligations and customs and lifts that burden of obligation for the illness's duration. But neurodivergence is not temporary and, even when disabling, we might rightly balk at the language of illness to describe our identities. It is gratifying that halakha sees that *istinis* is an identity that even the Talmudic rabbis themselves do not hesitate to claim. *Istinis ani*, they say (JT Yoma 8:1). This is my identity. This is what I need.

And yet, there is something unsettling in seeing oneself as fragile; to admit that one's serenity or sense of calm is so precarious that not listening to a certain song or not being able to wash and wear a certain shirt is enough to destroy one's well being. However, that fragility feels shared during Tisha B'Av, a time when the restrictions and liturgy remind us of how precarious the world can be and how easily things can and have fallen. Perhaps what is so distressing about Tisha B'Av is that it is the day when we deliberately approach that edge. When the day ends, we are expected to take a deep breath and return.

That balance is hard to strike at the best of times and hardest of all when we go into Tisha B'Av already held together with twine and chewing gum. That fragility is not limited to neurodivergence; some years and life experiences are more desta-

bilizing and shattering than others, but the test of Tisha B'Av is to step into a space of fragility and then step back afterwards. The test is to answer the call of the haftarot that bookend Tisha B'Av. When we read "comfort, comfort, my people" (Yeshayahu 40:2), we might also hear "find comfort by being among your people." Neurodivergent Jews are so often left on the outside of Jewish community, yet Yeshayahu the prophet has the answer to that as well. He tells us, in God's name, what to do on the Shabbat before Tisha B'Av: "Learn to do good. Devote yourselves to justice; aid the wronged. Uphold the rights of the orphan; defend the cause of the widow" (Yeshayahu 1:11). Find the fragile, precarious people in your world and help them. Because Tisha B'Av is a time when we sit as precariously as we can safely bear. For some of us, that's quite close to our usual levels of fragility while for others it is a much larger shift. For us to come back from that edge, we need the care and help of those around us. We need to be comforted by our communities by being in community. There will always be Jews for whom certain of the mourning restrictions or practices of the day will be impossible, but we all deserve to have our broken hearts addressed. In the same way that halakha sees the *istinis* and offers them understanding and accommodation, I want our community to see all our fragilities and, after our tears have been shed, find a way to meet us where we are and say "be comforted for you are still our people."

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Rosh Chodesh

On New Months and New Beginnings


Rabbanit Dasi Fruchter

Class of '16

The special maftir of Parshat HaChodesh brings us back to the eve of the redemption from the land of Egypt. Though Chazal teach us that Bnei Yisrael held onto threads of their dignity by keeping their dress, language, and names, in that moment they were a fraction of the people they used to be. They were teetering on the very lowest rung of the ladder of despair and spiritual impurity. In this state, mired in their narrow straits, Bnei Yisrael receives the commandment to sanctify the new month.

God said to Moshe and Aharon in the land of Egypt:

“This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you” (Shemot 12:2).

Year after year, as we stand on the threshold of Nisan, we read this passage, ready to greet the month of redemption. What can this commandment teach us as we prepare, just like Bnei Yisrael, for our own Pesach rituals?

This passage of “hachodesh hazeh lachem”, describing the sanctification of the new month, appears in many places in our rabbinic teachings, including in the Talmud (Shabbat 147b), which relates the story of the Tannaitic sage Rabbi Elazar Ben Arach. The story notes that Rabbi Elazar Ben Arach leaves his colleagues to visit cities famous for their whimsical rivers and luxurious wine. When he returns from his trip, he is called up to read from the section of sanctifying the new month, but

instead of saying “hachodesh hazeh lachem” (this month shall be for you), he reads, “hachareish haya libbam” (their hearts were silent). This phrase, where each word differs only slightly from the original, carries a completely different meaning, and the Talmud admonishes Rav Elazar Ben Arach for making such a gross error, likely as a result of leaving the company of his colleagues to visit places devoid of the Divine presence.

The Sfas Emes, however, in his commentary to this maftir, offers a more charitable reading of the story. Rabbi Elazar Ben Arach doesn’t make a foolish mistake by misreading the passage; he is simply teaching his colleagues a lesson about his experience in these cities. The act of sanctifying the new month, described in the passage he was supposed to read, is connected to the activity of the moon. The moon grows to its fullness and wanes to a thin sliver within the span of each month. The moon is a symbol for the possibility of renewal. In fact, says the Sfas Emes, the words for “month” (chodesh) and “new” (chadash) are closely related. In order to reach the potential of renewal, the moon teaches us that we sometimes dive to our lowest point before we can start to grow and regenerate.

Similarly, he taught, another way to view the waxing and waning moon is by looking at someone whose heart seems to be immune to any spirituality or meaning: hachareish haya libbam. But Rabbi Elazar Ben Arach, known in Avot DeRabbi Natan as someone who deeply values the power of the heart (“What is the best thing, the one that a person should cherish most?”...Rabbi Elazar B. Arach says the heart), needed to explain that, just like the people of that city, when we feel our farthest from God, we do not need to lose hope, for therein lies the most powerful opportunity for redemption.

Finally, this passage in Shemot could have easily read “the month,” but instead it reads “*this* month.” The word zeh, often used in Tanakh for its directness and clarity, should alert us to the power of the month of Nisan to wake up our hearts. It could be that the whole year, our hearts have been sleeping.

But no matter how difficult it seems to be to find our spark, or how narrow the world is feeling, Nisan—hachodesh hazeh—is the moment to wake them. For some, this month will be about going to classes and preparing for sedarim. For others, there may be a spiritual element to kashering a kitchen or emptying the contents of a cabinet to donate chametz to the needy. Yet, for all of us, Nisan contains the potential for true awakening. It is my blessing and hope that this Nisan we may be able to shift our routine and allow our hearts to become activated.

“

**Nisan contains the potential
for true awakening.**

Rabbanit Dasi Fruchter

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