# THOSE WHO GRASP IT

*Insights on the Torah by the Members of Minyan Maat*

1979-2023




Art by Adrienne Weiss

עֵץ־חַיִּים הִיא לַמַּחֲזִיקִים בָּהּ וְתֹמְכֶיהָ מְאֻשָּׁר.

*It is a tree of life to those who grasp it…*

Proverbs 3:18

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Within each parasha, drashot are listed chronologically, to the extent a date was discernible from the materials submitted.

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| CAROL | LEVITHAN | SHAVUOT | | 2007 | 1111 |
| CAROL | LEVITHAN | | YIZKOR | | 1127 |
| RON | MEYERS | Bereishit | | 2015 | 13 |
| RON | MEYERS | Noach | | 2019 | 69 |
| RON | MEYERS | Vayeira | | 2014 | 125 |
| RON | MEYERS | Vayeira | | 2021 | 131 |
| RON | MEYERS | Toldot | | 2013 | 227 |
| WILLIAM | MEYERS | Tetzaveh | | 2003 | 431 |
| RON | MEYERS | Behar / Bechukotai | AUFRUF | 2014 | 631 |

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|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| RON | MEYERS | Vaetchanan | SHABBAT NACHAMU | 2017 | 837 |
| RON | MEYERS | Eikev | | 2012 | 849 |
| RON | MEYERS | Vaeira | | 2020 | 359 |
| RON | MEYERS | Ki Tisa | | 2014 | 479 |
| RON | MEYERS | Acharei Mot / Kedoshim | | 2018 | 617 |
| RON | MEYERS | Korach | | 2016 | 767 |
| RON | MEYERS | ROSH HASHANA | | 2014 | 965 |
| RON | MEYERS | ROSH HASHANA | | 2023 | 993 |
| RON | MEYERS | SHABBAT SHUVA | | 2022 | 1005 |
| RON | MEYERS | YOM KIPUR | VIDUI | 2022 | 1037 |
| RON | MEYERS | SHMINI ATZERET | YIZKOR | 2023 | 1041 |
| RON | MEYERS | ELUL | | 2021 | 1119 |
| RON | MEYERS | | LGBT PRIDE WEEK | 2020 | 1135 |
| ANITA | NORICH | Bamidbar | | | 705 |
| JUDY | OPPENHEIM | Chayei Sarah | YAHRZEIT | 2017 | 179 |
| JUDY | OPPENHEIM | Beshalach | | | 391 |
| JUDY | OPPENHEIM | Vayachel / Pekudei | | | 529 |
| JUDY | OPPENHEIM | Bamidbar | SHAVUOT | 2015 | 689 |
| BEN | ORLOVE | Noach | | 2019 | 81 |
| BEN | ( ORLOVE | Noach | | | 85 |
| BEN | ORLOVE | Chayei Sarah | | 2015 | 167 |
| BEN | ORLOVE | Toldot | | 2014 | 237 |
| BEN | ORLOVE | Miketz | | 2016 | 319 |
| BEN | ORLOVE | Tetzaveh | | 2020 | 459 |
| BEN | ORLOVE | Ki Tisa | | 2021 | 489 |
| BEN | ORLOVE | Behar / Bechukotai | | | 667 |
| BEN | ORLOVE | Shelach Lecha | | 2019 | 761 |
| BEN | ORLOVE | Chukat / Balak | | 2017 | 789 |
| BEN | ORLOVE | Chukat / Balak | | 2022 | 797 |
| BEN | ORLOVE | Chukat / Balak | | | 807 |
| BEN | ORLOVE | Reeh | | 2017 | 861 |
| MARCIA | PALLY | Lech Lecha | | 2020 | 93 |
| MARCIA | PALLY | Vayeira | | 2021 | 141 |
| MARCIA | PALLY | Ki Tisa | | 2023 | 501 |
| MARCIA | PALLY | Tatzria / Metzora | | 2022 | 593 |
| NATHAN | PERL-ROSENTHAL | Ki Titzei | BAR MITZVA | 1995 | 869 |
| DAIVD | ROSENN | Tzav | | 2022 | 555 |
| DAIVD | ROSENN | Tzav | SHABBAT HAGADOL | 2021 | 565 |
| DAVID | ROSENN | Behar / Bechukotai | | 2019 | 639 |
| DAVID | ROSKIES | Vayeira | | 1983 | 107 |
| DAVID | ROSKIES | Haazinu | | 2023 | 919 |
| MELANIE | SCHNEIDER | ROSH HASHANA | | 2022 | 991 |
| MELANIE | SCHNEIDER | | PRAYER FOR THE USA | 2023 | 1149 |
| CLAUDIA | SETZER | Vayeitzei | | | 259 |
| CLAUDIA | SETZER | Devarim | | | 833 |
| CLAUDIA | SETZER | Haazinu | | 2008 | 907 |
| CLAUDIA | SETZER | Haazinu | | 2010 | 913 |
| DAIVD | SHAPIRO | Vayeishev | | 2022 | 303 |
| JUDITH | SHULEVITZ | Behar / Bechukotai | | 2022 | 657 |

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|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| JUDITH | SHULEVITZ | YOM KIPUR | YIZKOR | 2021 | 1031 |
| YONA | SILVERMAN | Bamidbar | AUFRUF | 2018 | 693 |
| YONA | SILVERMAN | Bhaalotecha | HS GRADUATION | 2001 | 743 |
| NANCY | SINKOFF | Bereishit | | 1996 | 1 |
| NANCY | SINKOFF | Vayishlach | | | 279 |
| NANCY | SINKOFF | Bo | | 2023 | 371 |
| NANCY | SINKOFF | Acharei Mot / Kedoshim | | 1991 | 597 |
| NANCY | SINKOFF | Acharei Mot / Kedoshim | | 1995 | 605 |
| NANCY | SINKOFF | Bamidbar | SHAVUOT | 2001 | 677 |
| NANCY | SINKOFF | SHABBAT ZACHOR | | 2010 | 1045 |
| NANCY | SINKOFF | SHABBAT HAGADOL | | 1999 | 1053 |

Yochanan

## Parashat Shemot – Inspired b ~~y Youchan~~ Muffs, z"l and Dianne Cohler-Esses

In preparing to leyn, I have often been moved, especially when the aliyot are part of the Biblical narrative: Abraham's regret at exiling Ishmael. Rachel begging Jacob for children. Moses begging God to show the divine self. But as I learned this 5th Aliyah I was fascinated by the long conversation between God and Abraham. And this text had an even greater impact because of a talk Dianne Cohler-Esses gave a few weeks ago at the annual yahrzeit lecture in honor of the great Bible scholar, our "very own" Yochanan Muffs. Dianne and I were classmates and hevruta partners at JTS but we never took the same Bible classes. My taste ran to textual criticism -- analysis of the text in terms of similarities to other Ancient Near Eastern texts, when and where the texts originated in ancient Israelite society, how they corresponded to actual historical events -- while Dianne was more likely to have had the opportunity to study with Yochanan in his last years at the Seminary since I would describe her interests as more literary and spiritual.

So to pull this together – Dianne's talk about Yochanan's book *The Personhood of God* and my reading of that book in the weeks since her talk – have finally introduced me to Yochanan the scholar. And that book has given me language to explain why the text I leyned today moved me so much and has also given me – a religious skeptic - access to a broader framework for understanding how the portrayal of God in the Hebrew Bible can be a pathway to a religious life.

Professor Muffs spends the early chapters of his book explaining the ways in which Israelite religion differed from the pagan religions common in the ANE: "Since there was only One God now, He necessarily had to take over all – and I emphasize all – of the po wers, fu nct ions and obligations of the old multi-deified pantheon. Since He was a fusion and conc ent rat ion of all the old powers, He could perform these functions with a sublime ease and facility never seen before. ... God could be worshipped by man since He was so much like him. He constantly appeared in many and ever-changing roles lest He be frozen and converted into the dumb idols He Himself despised. God was a polyvalent personality who, by mirroring to man His many faces, provided the models that man so needed to survive and flourish. This is the true humanity of God."

And God's humanity is dramatically revealed in Shemot where God chooses Moses as the leader who will free the Israelites from bondage. Most of the conversations between God and Moses are about the specifics of dealing with Pharaoh and arranging for the escape from Mitzrayim. But in chapters 3 and 4 we see the formation of a relationship between them where each asserts "personhood" in Yochanan's terms. One can imagine these exchanges as between a parent and child, two friends, a mentor and a younger assoc iate; a boss and ar em ployee; but these are between the one God and a human, chosen for an e xtraor dinary task. The tone of the conversation is extraordinary: ironic, patronizing, slightly mocking, with the mentor first annoyed -- even angered -- at the associate's resistance but then accepting and acquiescent.

God lays out the divine plan in the first seven very confident, energetic verses of the 5th Aliyah, reciting to Moses what he needs to do to enact this plan. This, in spite of the fact that Moses has just expressed doubts in the 4th Aliyah about his fitness to go to Pharaoh and plead a case

for freeing his people. Moses hasn't exactly said "No" to God; rather he has asked God to give him a name to use when informing the Israelites that they will be freed. One can assume that the people are accustomed to personal names for the gods of the Ancient Near East but this God answers Moses with the mystifying name of "Ehey-Asher-Ehyeh" at the end of fourth Aliyah and then proceeds in the first seven verses of the 5th Aliyah to lay out his plan. God is completely confident that by following this plan, Moses will prevail and the Egyptians will not only let the Israelites go but they will go with silver, gold and clothing they have acquired from the Egyptians.

This is so reminiscent of conversations wherein a friend or a family member or a random person on the phone makes a case for something in an almost breathless way, assuming you will be convinced. And Moses takes it all in and then – at the beginning of chapter 4 – he finally speaks. But the verb here is not just "speaks". It is "Va'yaan Moshe va'yomer" which has the force of a strong response; not "Moses said". Rather, *Etz Hayim* translates it as "But Moses spoke up and said: 'What if they do not believe me and do not listen to me, but say: 'The Lord did not appear to you?'" Moses makes it clear – politely - that God's self-assurance about this plan for freeing His people has some defects since his fellow Israelites want more than a name; they will want to know if Moses saw God.

In the rather mocking response – "What's in your hand, Moses?" - God blithely ignores Moses' question but Moses responds dutifully - "a rod". For the next 9 verses Moses is quiet as God tries to impress him with 3 reversible miracles that Moses can use to impress the people – first, turning the rod into a snake; next, causing Moses' hand to be covered with "snowy scales" and finally, aware perhaps that two might not be enough, God offers the coup de grace: "And if they are not convinced by both these signs and still do not heed you, take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground, and it – the water that you take from the Nile – will turn to blood on the dry ground." This reminds me of a conversation with a toddler or a teenager who wants to do something inadvisable but conjures up several impressive arguments on behalf of that plan; it is also reminiscent of Pharaoh's magicians who are able to replicate the first few tricks that Moses uses when he finally gets to Pharaoh's court. In short, these miracles or "signs" are not so impressive given the context. And they don't address Moses' doubts.

After the water from the Nile is turned into blood the text continues: "But Moses said to the Lord, 'Please, O Lord, I have never been a man of words.... I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.'" What is remarkable about this verse is that Moses uses both God's chosen name – Yod hey vav hey – as well as the form of the word "Adon" as in "lord" with a lower case L. They sound identical but are quite different; it's as though Moses were saying "Adonai, my liege", the second term, a very personal name that he uses again in verse 14 when he once again turns God down. Moses' very carefully chosen demurral of the role God has in mind for him prompts a remarkable response by God who asks rhetorically in a very self-important way: "Who gives man speech? Who makes him dumb or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now go, and I will be with you as you speak and will instruct you what to say."

This response by God states the obvious and Moses hasn't questioned God's powers; rather, he has stated his own limitations. But God comes across here as rather thin skinned and oblivious to Moses' doubts. It sounds similar to the way God responds to Job when he cries out for some explanation for his immense suffering but in that context it is part of a revelatory speech, God revealing the fullness of his power which renders him unknowable by humans. Here it feels as though God – very proud of these three signs – is bullying Moses to do what God wants him to do. But Moses continues to resist – albeit in a most gentle way; clearly aware that he may be risking something by protesting: "But he said, 'Please, O Lord, make someone else Your agent.'"

God's reaction to this is anger – "Yayihar af Elokim" - literally, his nose burned! Given this response, one might imagine a pagan god striking down the recalcitrant human, but this God immediately relents and comes up with Plan B – which he clearly already had in mind given this immediate response – including Aaron as the divine spokesman and perhaps flaunting divine knowledge by telling Moses that Aaron is currently on the way to meet Moses and "will be happy to see you." God is mollified: Moses will put the words in Aaron's mouth, Aaron will speak to the people and God will be there for both of them: "Thus he shall serve as your spokesman, with you playing the role of Elohim to him." This is truly extraordinary. God is not using his *yud hey vav hey* name here but he certainly is reducing the distance between human and divine by using the word "el" – a "god". This relates directly to Yochanan's idea of the Israelite God encompassing the pagan Pantheon: "elohim" – "gods" – becomes the second name of the One God who is loaning it here to Moses. And finally, God the parent closes his conversation with a reminder: "And take with you this rod, with which you will perform the signs."

So what's the connection to Yochanan Muff's ideas about the personhood of God?
This notion may seem heretical when talking about the One God, the omnipotent, omniscient God, the unique creation of Israelite religion. But Yochanan argues that "A model of divinity that does not partake of personhood can hardly be expected to cultivate personhood in man. Furthermore, a boring and unevocative model, no matter how correct philosophically, is certainly of little "world-creating" value. The problem, therefore, of the modern religious humanist is how to demythologize the model without sapping it of poetic force and psychological profundity…."

Finally, Professor Muffs opines that "a psychologically oriented, mythically formulated" notion of God would "be valuable to those theists, atheists and agnostics who cultivate humanistic values." It seems unlikely that this gift to "theists, atheists and agnostics" was the intention of the ancient Israelites who worshipped this God but, he argues, if this approach to the personhood of God can be accepted either as a "psychological poem or a reflection of some ontological reality" - two quite disparate approaches to understanding God - "it may possibly serve as the basis of a faith which humanists of all kinds can hold in common." In conclusion, I not only learned to leyn the 5th Aliyah of Parashat Shemot but I have received deep religious insights thanks to Professor Muffs and Rabbi Dianne Cohler-Esses. SHABBAT SHALOM!

# Vayera: Shemot – 6:2-9:35 – October 26, 2018

Last year I did a drash on Parashat Shemot that was heard by a very small, very male assemblage since so many of the women in the minyan were attending one of the extraordinary gatherings on the day after the inauguration. The drash was inspired by a teaching Dianne Cohler-Esses had done in which she included references to *The Personhood of God*, the last book written by Yochanan Muffs, z"l. I never had the privilege of learning from Yochanan as many of you had, but I was intrigued by what Dianne presented, read the book and was inspired to do that drash and this one.

In the early chapters of *The Personhood of God*, Yochanan explains the ways in which the God of the Israelites differed from the pagan gods of the ANE: "Since there was only One God now, He necessarily had to take over all – and I emphasize the word *all* – of the powers, functions and obligations of the old multi-deified pantheon. Since He was a fusion and concentration of all the old powers, He could perform these functions with a sublime ease and facility never seen before. ... God could be worshipped by man since He was so much like him. He constantly appeared in many and ever-changing roles lest He be frozen and converted into the dumb idols He Himself despised. God was a polyvalent personality who, by mirroring to man His many faces, provided the models that man so needed to survive and flourish. This is the true humanity of God." Professor Muffs enumerates the roles assumed by the One God -- God the father, God the husband, God the king and ultimate master but also God the spice maker, architect, interior decorator.... the midwife the veterinarian, the creditor, the debtor, etc.... "God occasionally laughed and more often cried; He was consoled by prophets and His anger was cooled by prophets and zealots. He walked, he talked, rested, and slept, but He was always awake...."

This "true humanity of God" is vividly expressed in God's interactions with Moses – the individual in all of Torah who most needs these models mirrored by the faces of God "to survive and flourish" as he assumes the role of leader of the Israelites. Beginning in chapter 3 of Shemot, God counsels, advises, and directs Moses who is preparing to go before Pharaoh to plead the case for his people. But we also see God displaying mythic powers and loaning them to Moses who begins to emerge as a leader after his initial resistance to the role God has chosen for him. The God of Shemot is a variant of the God of Genesis. The "mythic" aspect of God's personality is on full display in Genesis where God's behavior resembles that of the pagan gods: creating not only with words but also by using the dust of the earth and blowing into Adam's nostrils; destroying the world with a flood; scattering those building a city and a tower lest they become one people with one language; destroying the city of Sodom for its sins. This mythic God insured the viability of the first family by opening the wombs of Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel; intervening to save a child about to be sacrificed on Mount Moriah; and arranging for divine beings to appear to Hagar on the road to Shur, as guests of Abraham and Sarah at the terebinths of

Mamre, at Lot's house in Sodom, to Hagar again in the wilderness of Beer-Sheva, to Jacob at Bet El and at Paniel where he wrestled with a divine being.

But by the time we reach the end of Genesis with the family in Egypt and Joseph an advisor to Pharaoh, the relationship between God and the leaders of the people changes, reflecting a valence change in this "polyvalent personality". It's no longer a family story but the story of a people in relationship to other peoples. God needs a human to represent God in negotiations with the Egyptian Pharaoh. Of course, before Moses assumes his role as emissary, he must have an inaugural experience to understand that he has become an agent of the One God and he is appropriately terrified by the bush that burns and is not consumed. As they talk over the role Moses is to play and God addresses Moses' objections, we experience the personhood of God. Granted, there are occasional displays of the mythic persona necessary to bring Moses fully on board in their joint enterprise: in Chapter 4 when God causes Moses' hand to become encrusted with snowy scales and then cures the scales and again in chapter 7 when Aaron's rod turns into a serpent and then back into a rod. And, of course, the plagues are epically mythic, but that's to be expected.

Both God and Moses will partake of the mythic in this parashah but primarily, Vaera presents God in full personhood mode, explaining divine polyvalence in the first verse: "I am the Lord. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as El Shaddai, but I did not make myself known to them by yod hey vav hey". It's not clear if God is drawing an explicit distinction between myth and personhood by changing the divine name, but it is immediately clear that Moses is needed as an intercessor. God needs human partners to communicate the divine plan to Pharaoh, to navigate all that lies ahead, to assure the Israelites that their God is not at all like pagan gods but in a class by itself.

God and Moses enter into a relationship with God as the CEO outlining an organizational chart: "See, I place you in the role of God to Pharaoh, with your brother Aaron as your prophet. You shall repeat all that I command you, and your brother Aaron shall speak to Pharaoh to let the Israelites depart from This land." (7:1-2) Moses is taking advice and instructions from God who is acting as an executive coach and God persuades Moses to appear before Pharaoh as an intercessor, presumably helped along by having demonstrated divine mythic powers that will support Moses on his mission. Having loaned these powers to Moses, God is figuring out how Moses can best use them to impress Pharaoh who is under the mistaken impression that he, Pharoah, is a god. This is a period of training and learning for Moses who will have plenty to deal with in the travels ahead when he will be forced to make decisions on his own, negotiate frequently with a very angry God and deal constantly with a very difficult and restive people. Is it possible that God keeps hardening Pharaoh's heart as a kind of executive training for Moses? Is this much-analyzed repeated hardening of Pharaoh's heart simply a divine methodology to build Moses' self-confidence so he can do the job God has assigned him? The repetition helps build Moses' confidence in the power God has transferred to him, while the variations from one plague to another help maintain the reader's

interest in a series of scenes that have had immense staying power over the millennia.

On a side note – my favorite variation in the account of the plagues is that Pharaoh's magicians replicate Moses' magic, bringing even more frogs out of the Nile. I like to think this was a deliberate touch of humor since like all great works of literature, the Bible has its share of humor - but it would have been much more impressive if they had been able to drive the damn frogs back INTO the Nile! And when it comes to the frogs – something I never noticed before happens at 8:5 and demonstrates that Moses is gaining a sense of his own power. Pharaoh agrees to let the people go to sacrifice to their God, and Moses asks a clarifying question that was not included in God's instructions: "You may have this triumph over me", says Moses to Pharaoh, "for what time shall I plead in behalf of you and your courtiers and your people, that the frogs be cut off from you and your houses to remain only in the Nile?" Pharaoh replies, "For tomorrow" and Moses agrees to that timetable for ending the plague, adding that henceforth frogs will be restricted to the Nile. Did God forget to be specific with Moses regarding the duration of the plague? Did God not plan to rid the frogs from the Nile? Or is Moses thinking for himself, improvising for Pharaoh as a way of currying his favor and also demonstrating that he can make promises for God? God apparently gave Moses room for improvisation, certainly a good strategy for learning on the job. And the ironic tone in which Moses asks Pharaoh when he would like God to end the plague of frogs - "You may have this triumph over me: for what time shall I plead in behalf of you and your courtiers...." suggests that Moses is beginning to feel comfortable in his role and is playing with Pharaoh, since, of course, God could end the plague at any time or leave Egypt eternally beset by frogs.

Later, in chapter 8, Moses improvises again and expands significantly upon the simple instruction that God gives in verse16: "Thus says the Lord: Let my people go that they may worship Me." But in 8:21, Moses replies to Pharaoh's order – "Go and sacrifice to your God within the land" – with this expansive response: "It would not be right to do this, for what we sacrifice to the Lord our God is untouchable to the Egyptians. If we sacrifice that which is untouchable to the Egyptians before their very eyes, will they not stone us? So, we must go a distance of three days into the wilderness and sacrifice to the Lord our God as He may command us." And, again, Moses agrees to plead with the Lord that the swarms of insects depart the next day. Verse 8:26 – "So Moses left Pharaoh's presence and pleaded with the Lord. And the Lord did as Moses asked. He removed the swarms of insects from Pharaoh, from his courtiers, and from his people; not one remained." The line between God and Moses begins to blur in these scenes and the student is now acting on his own authority and making strategic suggestions to the teacher to advance their mutual interests.

Of course, Pharaoh breaks his word again and God retaliates with a plague that kills all the livestock of the Egyptians while the livestock of the Israelites are unaffected. Following immediately is an inflammation on all Egyptians resulting from the soot God instructs Aaron and Moses to throw into the sky. God sends Moses to Pharaoh again with a demand to be permitted to worship and promises "a very heavy hail,

such as has not been in Egypt from the day it was founded until now." Alarmed by this warning, some of Pharaoh's courtiers bring their slaves and livestock indoors to safety while Moses moves into mythic territory when instructed by the Lord to "'Hold out your arm toward the sky that hail may fall on all the land of Egypt.' ...Moses held out his rod toward the sky, and the Lord sent thunder and hail, and fire streamed down to the ground, as the Lord rained down hail upon the land of Egypt."

Once again, Pharaoh calls upon Aaron and Moses "that there may be an end of God's thunder and of hail. I will let you go, you need stay no longer." Without any prior instructions from God, Moses responds with confidence in his borrowed mythic powers, making sure that Pharaoh knows his powers: "As I go out of the city, I shall spread out my hands to the Lord; the thunder will cease and the hail will fall no more; so that you may know that the earth is the Lord's. But I know that you and your courtiers do not yet fear the Lord God. Leaving Pharaoh, Moses went outside the city and spread out his hands to the Lord: the thunder and the hail ceased, and no rain came pouring down upon the earth." Moses not only speaks truth to power but he has demonstrated a willingness to improvise in his meetings with Pharaoh and does not demur when God suggests that his very arms have special powers to influence the natural world. What a contrast with his words to God at the beginning of the parashah (6:9): "...Moses appealed to the Lord, saying "The Israelites would not listen to me; how then should Pharaoh heed me, a man of impeded speech!" Moses has not only done well with his speech, a human quality, but with his arms as well.

But now back to Yochanan's ideas about the personhood of God. The God of Shemot is a significantly different God than the God of Genesis who stayed primarily behind the scenes, represented by devastating mythical powers and by divine beings of various sorts. Yochanan argues that "A model of divinity that does not partake of personhood can hardly be expected to cultivate personhood in man". The notion may seem heretical when talking about the omnipotent and omniscient God, the unique creation of Israelite religion, but where would we be if we only had the God of Genesis? Yochanan continues: "Furthermore, a boring and unevocative model, no matter how correct philosophically, is certainly of little 'world-creating' value. The problem, therefore, of the modern religious humanist is how to demythologize the model without sapping it of poetic force and psychological profundity....". I love this idea that "A model of divinity that does not partake of personhood can hardly be expected to cultivate personhood in man," because it seems to assume that ancient geniuses were deliberate in the creation of the "polyvalent God of Israel" which brings us back to the first chapter of *The Personhood of God* where Professor Muffs explains -- "Since there was only One God now, He necessarily had to take over all – and I emphasize the word all – of the powers, functions and obligations of the old multi-deified pantheon." All of the powers, from kingship to veterinarian.

Years ago my new Jewish soul found a home at the SAJ where the brilliant Rabbi Alan Miller, z"l presided for more than 30 very eventful years. I was introduced to a concept often quoted as a short hand way to describe a central idea of Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of the SAJ, a great philosopher and religious humanist. It went

something like – "God is a projection upward of humanity at its highest level of functioning" -- and it seems related to Yochanan's understanding when he argues: "The sophisticated philosopher, instead of being embarrassed by the personhood and mythic character of the old God, can delight in them as poetically formulated models of man's humanity." Aren't poetically formulated models of man's humanity necessarily human in origin? I don't mean to reduce Professor Muffs' beautifully nuanced description of the polyvalent God to a "Does God exist?" argument. Rather, I want to celebrate the idea Dianne used on her source sheet from *The Personhood of God*: "...a psychologically oriented, mythically formulated phenomenology of the world affirming God as He appears in the Bible and in later rabbinic tradition would be valuable to those theists, atheists and agnostics who cultivate humanistic values. **Since the phenomenon can be accepted either as a psychological poem or as a reflection of some ontological reality, it may possibly serve as the basis of a faith which humanists of all kinds can hold in common**." Theists, agnostics and atheists alike, whether we see the truth in a psychological poem or the reflections of some ontological reality, may we continue to preserve both the baby of poetry and psychological profundity as well as the mythological waters in which they both float.

# VAERA – TO NOT KNOW JOSEPH

Ron Lee Meyers

Minyan Maat – January 25, 2020

In the last few weeks, we have read the blockbuster stories of the Pharaoh's dream and of Joseph's ability to interpret them and save Egypt from disaster. This week we come to the blockbuster stories of the plagues. And last week we came to the fulcrum that tipped the balance between Israel's salvation in Egypt and Israel's salvation from Egypt: the single, portentous sentence that informed us that "There arose in Egypt a king who knew not Joseph."

Amid all of these familiar points in the story comes one moment in today's parasha, a single verse, that I think is equally pivotal, and it's easy to miss in the midst of all the other high drama.

In the run-up to the plagues, Moses and Aaron approach Pharaoh to demand the release of the Israelite slaves. We all know that they cast their staffs down and they become serpents, and that the Pharaoh's magicians are able to match their feats point by point. But it's easy not to notice that once both staffs have been transformed into serpents, the Israelite serpent consumes the Egyptian one (Ex. 7:12).

If we focus on that verse for the slightest moment, we, as readers of the last few parashayot, can't fail to recognize the repetition of a pattern that's familiar from the previous Pharaoh's dreams: one thing swallows up the other thing, as a sign that the one getting swallowed in a world of imminent danger. Even the language

here is identical to the language of Pharaoh's second dream (Gen 41:24). The moment is brief, I think, because we are primed for it – the text assumes that we don't need any more of a reminder than the one verse. We get it.

But Pharaoh doesn't get it. It's not just Joseph that he doesn't know – it's the whole history of the earlier Pharaoh's dreams, and of Joseph's interpretation and crisis management – a whole episode of his own nation's history, in which his people confronted doom but were spared. The new Pharaohs[1] have not learned this history, so when it comes time to read a symbol – and not in a dream, but with his fully-conscious, waking eyes – the guy is simply *illiterate*. When the old Pharaoh saw one beast swallow another, he knew it required interpretation. When the new one sees it, he thinks it's just a competition, and he thinks he's won.

It's a dangerous signal to miss. If the old Pharaoh had been so incurious[2] about a symbolic beast swallowing another symbolic beast, his nation would have succumbed to famine. This ignorant Pharaoh is unable to see the sign that unimaginable loss and tragedy are coming. *That* is what it means to not know Joseph.

We can play an interesting parlor game with this: to what may we compare a leader of Egypt who does not know Joseph? Is that like a president of the United States not knowing Lafayette, or James Madison, or George Marshall? An American president not recognizing Canada as a friend, or Russia as an enemy? Is it like a leader of New York not having a clue about Robert Moses or Frederick

[1] The Pharaoh in this episode is the successor of the one who "knew not Joseph" at Ex. 1:8. See Ex. 2:23.

[2] The word that journalists always used to politely describe George W. Bush's ignorance.

Law Olmstead, or, perhaps, to make the most exact match with Joseph, not recognizing the name Felix Rohatyn?

Parlor games aside, *ignorance in a leader is a problem*. Now, our former Vice President Dan Quayle might contend that it doesn't really matter whether you know how to spell "potato". And perhaps that's true. But it really does matter a lot whether or not you come to the job with an understanding of what it entails, an understanding of the world you will be dealing with, an understanding of the stream of history that you are stepping into. It matters a lot whether you are able to make your own judgments, or are so dependent on advisors that you become their mouthpiece – for example, if you appoint someone to review possible vice-presidential running mates, who then decides that he himself should be the running mate. These are danger signs in a leader.

And if ignorance in a leader is a problem, then *willful ignorance* is a much greater problem. It's dangerous to a nation if its leader is overly influenced by the views of others – if, for instance, policy always seems to reflect the opinion of the last person the leader has spoken to. But it's vastly more dangerous still if a leader declines even to hear or read any of the expert advice that's presented to him. It's one thing for a leader to be ignorant of the facts of history, but it's another thing for a leader to reject the facts of the present, to decide unilaterally what is real and what is fake, to decide that even the weather map can be redrawn at his whim; to dispense with fact-finding in policy, by eliminating scientific input on fundamentally scientific issues; or to dispense with fact-finding in a legal proceeding, by deciding that there's no obligation to hear from witnesses.

A nation with such leader… …is setting itself up for some plagues. Fire and water, pestilence and terror. Natural disasters, deaths of despair.

Pharaoh's responses to the plagues feature each of these qualities of poor leadership, and others, too. In the first two plagues, he is influenced by his magicians, who can apparently replicate the plagues through their own powers. After the fourth plague, Pharaoh submits to *impulse*, agreeing first to the let the Israelites go to conduct their rituals, and then suddenly reversing his decision and calling it off. For the first *five* plagues, Pharaoh willfully opts to stand his ground – to take what we might call an ideological stance, ignoring the reality of the havoc all around him.

We often focus on the passages where Gd hardens Pharaoh's heart. But it's easy to miss the fact that in these first five plagues, it's Pharaoh hardening his own heart. That's his style of leadership, and both he and his entire nation pay the price for it. This may offer a way of understanding the later passages where Pharaoh's heart is hardened by Gd – perhaps this reflects the way that a decision, once made, takes on a life of its own. Once you go down one path, the other path is closed off, and the momentum of events overtakes the ability to change course or change perspective. In the first five plagues, Pharaoh is exercising a power of decision; by the second five, his character is *fixed,* as if he were *created by Gd* with a hardened heart. But really Pharaoh has created himself with the hardened

heart, and at some point he can't un-create it, any more than he can un-create the death and destruction it has caused.[3]

The destructive force of ignorance, and particularly the destructive force of forgetting *iconic events of your own history*, creates a spectacle for the education of the Israelite people. The plagues and the Exodus that ensue from Pharaoh's *forgetting* become the event that we are commanded forevermore to *remember*. The plagues and Exodus are the beginning of the Jews' history as a nation, and they are the foundation point of our very specific identity as a nation that *remembers*.

In categorical contrast to Egypt, whose leaders had forgotten their own history, the Jewish nation springs into being with a birthright to a sacred history, and, accordingly, with a sacred duty to sustain the memory of that history.[4] What follows from here in the text is an extravaganza of commands of remembrance. I won't catalogue them now, but suffice it to say that while the tenth plague is fully described in a single passage of two verses (Ex. 12:29-30), the command to remember the exodus that ensues from that plague comes in two passages totaling eleven verses (Ex. 12:14-20, 24-27), replete with redundancy and exquisite detail as to dates, time periods, and (of course) ritual foods. Most astonishing of all, the command to remember the event occurs *before* the event itself!

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[3] This is why it's so important to always keep a door open to *tshuva*, and to have an annual exercise of *cheshbon ha-nefesh* and *tshuva* – it becomes harder and harder to change as we proceed further and further down a negative path.

[4] Also, in contrast to Pharaoh's forgetting about Joseph, the Israelites specifically remember Joseph, carrying his bones out of Egypt when they depart. (Ex. 13:19).

FURTHER DETAIL:

We think of this moment as the point at which Israel has its whole future ahead of it, but it's also true that a people with a big future has to prepare to have a big past. And when I say that this "follows", it's not quite correct, because the commands to remember are so urgent and forceful that they start coming even before the events that are to be remembered.

Before the tenth plague occurs, the Israelites are commanded not only how to mark their doorposts and consume the lamb and prepare for their departure; they are told how to remember in the generations to come the things that are about to happen. This is commanded at length, with redundancy and exquisite detail as to dates, time periods, foods and rituals. Then it's all repeated in full twice more between then and the actual exodus. The tenth plague itself is described in two verses; the instructions for how to remember the exodus that is triggered by it occupies dozens of verses. While the people are first collecting manna in the wilderness, they are also told how to commemorate in the future generations the experience of subsisting on manna now. They are of course implored to banish the memory of Amalek – and, paradoxically, to always to sustain the memory of the obligation to banish the memory. And when the Ten Commandments are given, the version of the Fourth Commandment they receive is the one commanding the *remembrance* of the Sabbath day, not its observance.

Apart from the Fourth Commandment, the Ten Commandments are not commands about memory; they are the opening of a big wave of laws, which occupy the entirety of the next three chapters. But laws require a different kind of memory: they are enacted at one time and effective thereafter; they have no meaning or force unless they are remembered. In this way, laws are not a command of remembrance of the events of past history, they are an application of remembrance to *present* events, all *throughout* history. Which illustrates the way memory *connects different points in time* – as does our obligation to remember the Exodus as if each of us was there personally (as expressed in the Passover Hagada), and as does Moses's assertion in Deuteronomy that the covenant with Gd is made not only with those present then, but also with those not present, in the unfurling future history of the Covenant.

Jewish consciousness prizes *memory* to such a degree that we labor to remember a foundational event that might not have actually happened. We have no contemporaneous archaeological sources to corroborate the stories of our enslavement, the plagues or the Exodus. So history and memory are not the same thing. But this does not invalidate our focus on a *perceived* history, a defining narrative, through which we derive our identity. As Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi observed, Jews through the ages have rarely been historiographers, even while we have always been passionate keepers of historical memory. Yerushalmi wrote that if Herodotus originated the *writing* of history, the Jews originated the idea of reading *meaning* in history. To focus on meaning in history is to inform the present with vast dimensions of reflection, prudence and moral

concern, and to invest the present with the full resonance of its precedents and its consequences.

Our present moment in the world now is a precarious time, because we are in danger of not investing it with such consciousness. What happens, for instance, when the memory of World War II fades, when just enough people have died who had remembered the horrors of genocide, or just enough people have lost sight of the benefits of a peaceful European union among the nations that had spent the past several centuries at war with each other? What happens is: antisemitism, and Brexit, and, most recently, threats by an American president to conduct belligerent acts that would violate the Geneva conventions.

To all of this we have to say, *zachor, zachor*. It is our imperative to remember. To remember not only the facts of what happened, but the meaning of them – to learn, and live, the lessons of the past.

The cliché schoolteacher's argument in favor of studying history is that "if you don't know where you've been you can't know where you're going". I've never found that convincing – you can never know much about the future, no matter how much you know about the past. But I do think that if you don't know where you've been then you cannot understand *where you are now*. Like Pharaoh, you can't see the patterns and warning signs before your eyes. And if, like Pharaoh, you don't absorb the lessons of history through *study*, then you'll have to learn them the much harder and harsher way, through *experience*.

# PARASHAH BO – JANUARY 8, 2011

Though tied with Noach for the shortest name of a parasha, Bo presents, perhaps, the most difficulty in regard to its specific meaning. The Etz Hayim chumash, as with most, translates the opening of our parashah as God telling Moshe to "(Bo) Go to pharaoh…" yet the Art Scroll chumash presents this as "(Bo) Come to pharaoh…." In most translations of Genesis 15:15, in the midst of the pact between the pieces, God tells Avraham: "You shall (vo) go to your fathers in peace…" while in Genesis 26:27, Isaac says to Avimelech: "Why have you (baw) come to me…?" The Art Scroll translates both instances as "come." It seems as if we don't know if we are coming or going with' bo.' Jeffrey Benner, in a philological statement, declares: "The verb *baw* does not mean 'come' or 'go' in the sense of direction but to 'enter a void in order to fill it' in the sense of purpose."

In Exodus 20:8 we will be told to "remember" the Sabbath day but in the repetition of the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy (5:12) we will be told to "observe" the Sabbath day. The Rabbis sought to harmonize these two statements, which they regarded as inseparable, by claiming both were uttered simultaneously. Similarly, we would not care to separate God saying to Moshe, "Go from me to confront pharaoh with what I have taught you in preparation for your struggle" from "Come to me here at pharaoh's palace where I will be present with you in your struggle." Only having an unshakable moral core as well as deep emotional resources could see one through such a confrontation of eternal resonances. In Genesis 18:19, in deciding to inform Avraham of the fate of S'dom and Gomorrah, God says: "For I have singled him out so that he may instruct his children and posterity to keep the way of the Lord by doing tzedakah…." It is worth recalling that the word 'tzedek' is derived from an Aramaic source meaning "to speak the truth."

Whether we go to it or come to it, what does it feel like to truly "speak truth to power?" This phrase, which we all use so easily, actually originated only in the 1950s. We tend to think of what it represents as eternal in human affairs but, for example, there is nothing in the epic of Gilgamesh that remotely resembles a moral confrontation of this sort. To "speak truth to power" requires some sense of a moral code by which even the sovereign or deity is bound. The readiest example in the Torah prior to Moshe confronting pharaoh which might be adduced is when Avraham appears to challenge God about the minimum number of righteous necessary to preserve S'dom. However, we are mistaken if we think Genesis 18:22-32 is about Avraham confronting, bargaining with and extracting concessions from God. The S'dom story might more accurately be seen as that of an initiate being tested and educated about God's ways as God demonstrates what had always been God's intention. Evidence for this view can be found in another moral confrontation in Genesis (20:4-6) wherein Avimelech, speaking of Avraham and Sarah, protests, "Lord, will you slay people even though innocent? He himself said to me, 'She

is my sister.' And she also said, 'He is my brother.' When I did this, my heart was blameless and my hands were clean." And God said to him in the dream, "I knew that you did this with a blameless heart, and so I kept you from sinning against me. That is why I did not let you touch her." Avraham and Avimelech learn God's ways in these confrontations just as we do in reading about them. But Moses is confronting a potentially lethal temporal power.

The midrash understands this in relating the following: "Serach was still alive at Moshe's return, and the elders took themselves to her, and told her the words of Moshe announcing the redemption. When she heard that his words had been the same as those Asher had quoted, she knew that he was the promised redeemer, and all the people believed in him. Thereupon Moshe invited the elders to go to pharaoh with him, but they lacked the courage to appear before the king. Though they started out with Moshe, they dropped off stealthily on the way, one by one, and when Moshe and Aaron stood in the presence of the king, they found themselves alone, deserted by all the others."

Moshe appeared before pharaoh and his court and his officers (Gen. 5:1 and 7:16) and he said, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Let My people go...." But pharaoh, he said: "Who is the Lord that I should be heedful and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, nor will I let Israel go." We read of this confrontation every year but how can we have any appreciation of the terror and courage involved in equal measure for the eighty year old Moshe, especially in his first encounter with pharaoh in the house of bondage and great necropolis that was Egypt? How can we gain an inkling of what it feels like to speak truth to power?

The University of Salamanca was founded in 1218 and it was the first educational institution anywhere to be granted the title of "university." It was at Salamanca that Columbus taught and Cervantes was a student. Miguel de Unamuno was a Basque poet, novelist, philosopher and a professor of Greek language and literature at Salamanca from 1891 to 1936. He was part of a remarkable generation of Spanish creativity which saw Santiago Ramon y Cajal win Spain's first Nobel prize in Medicine, Jose Ortega y Gasset gain renown as an intellectual, and Isaac Albeniz, Enrique Granados and Manuel de Falla bring Spanish music to the attention of the world. He was rector of the University from 1900 to 1914 when he was removed for favoring the Allied cause in World War I. In 1924 he was exiled to the Canary Islands because of his opposition to the Spanish dictatorship of Primo de Rivera, the founder of Spanish fascism. He returned as rector of the University in 1930 after the fall of de Rivera. Legend has it that he began his first lecture upon returning after six years with: "As I was saying...."

Jose Millan-Astray was a fanatical and xenophobic colonel in the Spanish Army who, in 1919, created a plan to professionalize the Spanish Foreign Legion which Berenguer had founded in 1911 as a ragtag force intended to help Spain catch up in the imperial race to acquire African territory. Spanish Morocco became their only colony in Africa. Millan-Astray, who lost his left arm in battle in 1924 and his right eye in 1926, was known as "the great mutilated one."

He developed the credo of commandments for the Foreign Legion, including the following: "The spirit of the legionary- blindly and fiercely combative; The spirit of discipline-the legionnaire will accomplish his duty, he will obey until death; The spirit of marching- a legionary will never say he is tired until he collapses with exhaustion; The spirit of combat- the Legion will demand always, always to fight; The spirit of death-to die in combat is the greatest honor and one does not die more than once; the battle cry of the Legion-long live death!" Francisco Franco, who was dictator of Spain from 1939 until 1975, began his ascent in the Legion. In May of 1936 the Popular Front's candidate for president, Manuel Azana, was democratically elected and in July of that year the army, which had supported the National Front, revolted. From 1936 to 1939 the Falangist Nationalists progressively drove back the Republicans. Salamanca fell in 1936, while Barcelona held on.

On October 12th of 1936, a Spanish national holiday which commemorates the day of Columbus' landing in the New World, Unamuno was presiding over the celebration at Salamanca at which Millan-Astray, Franco's wife and a crowd largely composed of armed Falangist fascists had gathered. The Fascist speaker who preceded Unamuno condemned Barcelona, Catalonia and the Basque country as "cancers to be cut out of the body of Spain." One of the assembled shouted out the Legion's battle cry: "Long live death!" Millan-Astray began a call-and-response with "Spain!" The crowd replied: "One!" The colonel: "Spain!" The crowd: "Great!" The colonel: "Spain!" The crowd: "Free!"

Unamuno, who was at that time seventy-two years old, frail and white haired, and who knew he could have been shot at any moment, rose and he said: "You are waiting for my words. You know me well, and know I cannot remain silent for long. Sometimes, to remain silent is to lie, since silence can be interpreted as assent. I want to comment on the so-called speech of Professor Maldonado, who is with us here. I will ignore the personal offence to the Basques and Catalonians. I myself, as you know, was born in Bilbao. The Bishop (Unamuno gestured to the visibly shaking Archbishop of Salamanca) whether you like it or not, is Catalan, born in Barcelona. But now I have heard this insensible and necrophilous oath, *"Long live death!"*, and I, having spent my life writing paradoxes that have provoked the ire of those who do not understand what I have written, and being an expert in this matter, find this ridiculous paradox repellent. General Millán-Astray is an invalid. There is no need for us to say this with whispered tones. He is an invalid of war. So was Cervantes. But unfortunately, Spain today has too many invalids. And, if God does not help us, soon it will have very many more."

Millán-Astray responded and he said: "Death to intelligence! Long live death!," provoking applause from the Falangists.

Unamuno continued, and he said: "This is the temple of intelligence, and I am its high priest. You are profaning its sacred domain. You will succeed, because you have enough brute force. But you will not convince. In order to convince it is necessary to persuade, and to persuade you will need something that you lack: reason and right in the struggle. I see it is useless to ask you to think of Spain. I have spoken." Millán-Astray, who was about to attack Unamuno, shouted,

"Take the lady's arm!" Unamuno took Franco's wife by the arm and left in her protection past armed thugs. Franco and Millan-Astray both wanted to have Unamuno killed but the poet Federico Garcia Lorca had just been assassinated by the Fascists in July. Unamuno was placed under house arrest and died of a heart attack two and a half months later. That is what speaking truth to power involves. The day Unamuno died, his two sons, who had equivocated, joined the Republican Army.

Thomas Jefferson wrote: "I have sworn upon the altar of God eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of Man." He also wrote: "Almighty God has created the mind free, and that all attempts to influence it by temporal punishments or burdens or by civil incapacitations tend only to beget habits of hypocrisy and meanness, and are a departure from the plan of the Holy Author...." Benjamin Franklin had proposed that the Great Seal of the United States should depict Moshe lifting his rod as the Egyptian army drowned in the sea.

Michael Walzer, a political philosopher, wrote a book entitled *Exodus and Revolution* in which he examined the book of Exodus as a foundational political text. He concluded by saying: "We still believe, or many of us do, what the Exodus first taught...first, that wherever you live, it is probably Egypt; second, that there is a better place, a world more attractive, a promised land; and, third, that 'the way to the land is through the wilderness.' There is no way to get from here to there except by joining together and marching."

I end as I began: "The verb *baw* does not mean 'come' or 'go' in the sense of direction but to 'enter a void in order to fill it' in the sense of purpose." That, I think, will serve as the beginning of a definition of a life well spent.

Howard L. Berkowitz

January 8, 2011

**דבר תורה**

**אופרוף של**

**עזרא דוב בן יהושע לייב ונעמי**

**יוחנה בת רפאל ואסתר**

**פרשת בא**

January 28, 2023

I am going to begin with "thank yous." The first goes to Betsy and Rob Mark, who have reared this wonderful woman, Jessie Louise Mark, who captured our first-born son Ezra's heart. And, as many of you know, I work at Rutgers—the State University of New Jersey, so not only did Betsy and Rob provide a bride for Ezra, but as NJ taxpayers, they also help pay my salary. The second goes to Rabbis Jeremy Kalmanofsky and Yael Hammerman, and to Hazzan Natasha Hirschorn—as well as to Rabbi Danny Nevins—for guiding us in today's service. Jeremy, Natasha, and Yael do this every shabbat, and the rest of the week they do so much more besides *prayer* to keep this shul running. And they did so during the dark period of our plague, COVID, while, atop everything, a capital campaign was running to renovate our old, creaky building. Gary and I are incredibly grateful for your guidance and your wisdom over the many decades that we have been part of this shul. We want to acknowledge, too, the hard work of the staff, beginning with Josh Hanft, my co-conspirator in all

things literary. To all the members of Minyan M'at and of the Sanctuary Minyan, in which we both participate, we thank you for sustaining our family as we created a Jewish home on Morningside Heights. To Martin, Richard, and Jim, our brothers/brothers-in-law, and uncles, thank you for ensuring that today's kiddush would be spirited with wine and whiskeys! Last, to our friends and family, who have journeyed from as far as Tel Aviv, Berlin, and London and as close as the apartments next door and on the 7th floor, we thank you for your love and, most importantly, for showing that love by celebrating Jessie and Ezra today.

Today's Torah portion, *parashat bo*/"Go" is the third section of the book of *Shemot/Names*, or "Exodus" according to the Christian canon. It is aptly named as we are in the throes of the narration of the great liberatory story of the Western World: the redemption of the Israelite slaves from the oppressions of a maniacal regime. This story has taken root among many peoples, particularly among Black Americans—but was also immortalized in the postwar Cold War epic film, *The Ten Commandments* [just substitute the Soviet Union for ancient Egypt and watch Cecil B. Demille's acceptance speech for the academy awards]. For the Jews, descendants of the Israelite slaves, today's narrative is at the heart of the Passover *seder*. Besides the motif of redemption, I want to call your attention to two main themes of the *parashah*: first, from

servitude to obligation expressed in the relationship of the plagues at the beginning to the *mitzvot*/commandments at the end, and second, the tension between the fate of the Jews vs the fate of other peoples, especially the Egyptians that expresses a larger theme of belonging to a specific group vs belonging to a universal collectivity.

Let me begin with the theme of servitude to obligation, and I will note that the kernel of the idea came from Ephraim Helfgot, a contemporary commentator. Today's *parashah* tells us about the last three devastating *makkot*/plagues: locusts, darkness, and the killing of the first born, with which the Divine punishes Pharoah and his people to convince him to let the Israelite slaves go free. The *parashah* ends, however, at chapter 13 after liberation with three "commandments": the obligation to eat unleavened bread/*matzah* on the redemption's anniversary and to instruct your children to do the same; the commandment to recall the Exodus with a "sign on your hand and forehead"; and the consecration of the first born to God. I hope to show you that these three obligations are linked to the three plagues that start the *parashah*.

The escalating punishment of the plagues is very hard to read. First, the eighth plague: the bugs. The *arbeh*/locusts, we are told in verses 10:14-15, and I'm freely translating, army-like, invaded all of Egypt, up to all of its borders, as

never before, covering the land—foreshadowing the next plague—so that it was darkened, "*vatakhshakh ha'aretz*/וַתֶּחְשַׁךְ הָאָרֶץ/," and then signaling an environmental catastrophe, "*velo-notar kol-yerek ba-etz uv'esev ha-saden be-khol eretz mizrayim*/וְלֹא־נוֹתַר כָּל־יֶרֶק בָּעֵץ וּבְעֵשֶׂב הַשָּׂדֶה בְּכָל־אֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם:/." Nothing green was left, no trees or grasses, in all of Egypt. Those of you with suburban roots may recall, as Jessie told me, the invasion of cicadas at the end of the summer. They were the incredibly noisy sounds of an August suburban childhood. However, cicadas are largely harmless and locusts may not seem to pose a threat to us in the northeast because most of us are not farmers, but our region's trees are facing the devastation of the deceptively beautiful Spotted Latternfly, and in northern reaches, the pestilence of the Emerald Ash borer is irrevocably changing the forests. It is possible that there will no longer be Ashes or Hemlocks in the Adirondacks in the not-so-distant future: a horrifying thought. These predatory, invasive insects are a contemporary plague of *arbeh*. Plague 9: Darkness. The utter absence of light for all of Egypt. Verse 10:23 reads: לֹא־רָאֹו אִישׁ אֶת־אָחִיו וְלֹא־קָמוּ אִישׁ מִתַּחְתָּיו שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים וּלְכָל־ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הָיָה אוֹר בְּמוֹשְׁבֹתָם:/No one could see one another, and no one could move for three days, but the "children of Israel" had light in their dwellings. Verse 21 describes the darkness as so visceral that it could be touched/. וְיֻמַּשׁ חֹשֶׁךְ and we are told that the Egyptians "could not get up" because, it seems,

the darkness was thick and heavy and obstructed movement. Which of course contrasts with the speed with which the Israelites will exit Egypt. And then the exceptionally cruel last plague: the killing of the first born/*makkot bekhorot*, 11:4 describes what will happen to every first-born child of the Egyptians, regardless of social class, and the agony of those who suffer/they will cry a צְעָקָה גְּדֹלָה/great cry. Some of you may notice how this plague echoes Pharoah's commandment that the midwives put to death all the first-born sons of the Israelite slaves 1:15-18 but goes further, condemning to death all first-born children of both sexes, and of the domesticated animals, too.

I would never make light of this narrative's accounting of suffering, but I do want to turn to the *parashah*'s last chapters in which the text offers a kind of parallel structure of *mitzvot*/ commandments to make meaning of that suffering for the Israelites. The larger meta-theme is to my mind the essence of our faith: freedom is not license, but obligation. The Israelite slaves move from *shi'abud*/subjugation or slavery to Pharoah to *avodat ha-shem*/service to God, employing the same root in Hebrew (ayin, bet, dalet). That is: the punishments that befell the Egyptians did so because their society was predicated on obedience to a ruthless human autocrat, while the aspirations of Israelite freedom are to create a covenantal bond with an incorporeal God based on obligation and service. The *parashah* ends—winding in a somewhat

convoluted way—to the emphasis on *matzah*, the unleavened bread that the Israelites are commanded to eat for seven days every year, and which they carry in their backpacks—before it could rise—as they hastily departed the land of their oppression. Today, we recite the blessing over *matzah* the way we do over any breadstuffs: *hamotzi lehem min ha-aretz*; *matzah* is bread of the earth, the counterpoint to the barren earth/*aretz* left after the devastation of the *arbeh*/locusts.

The 9th plague, darkness, is described not only in terms of the sense of sight, the inability to see, but also in terms of the sense of touch. The darkness is heavy and prevents the Egyptians from moving. In verse 13:8, the Israelites are told that they must remember the Exodus, and it will be a "sign on your hand and as a reminder on your forehead." In biblical times, this reminder is metaphoric, but with the development of Rabbinic Judaism, this reminder became tactile—haptic—through the practice of wearing *tefillin* on both the hand and on the forehead. That is: *tefillin* are a response to the plague of darkness in which two senses were occluded: sight and touch. The *tefillin* are worn on the forehead, with the eyes right below, and on the arm and hand, the part of the body that touches. Future generations of Jews remember the Exodus of Egypt, and the plague of darkness, when they put on *tefillin*. This *mitzvah* also suggests that we human beings can understand better if we rely

not only on one sense but on several. Where sight deceives, touch can illuminate, and vice-versa and with other senses as well.

And then the final horrific plague: the death of the first born. Verses 13:11-15 offers a very straight-forward response to it: "When Pharoah stubbornly refused to let the Israelites go, the Divine slew every first born in the land of Egypt, of both man and beast. Therefore I sacrifice to God every first male issue of the womb, but redeem every first-born among my sons." In our tradition, the *bekhor*, the first-born son belongs to God and must be redeemed. However, Ezra, because you are a *ben levi/a Levite*, we did not do the ceremony of *pidyon ha-ben* for you. Nonetheless, this ancient ritual affirms the revolutionary change that ensued when I became a mother and we became parents, a transformation resonant with the *parashah*'s historical revolution of the Israelite liberation from bondage.

So, the *parashah* teaches us that for Jews one of the preeminent ways to deal with the harshness of life is to do have purpose: our freedom requires obligation. This *parashah*, with its three devastating plagues and three ritualized responses, sets up this theme, which will become even clearer at Sinai in *parashat Yitro* two weeks from now. The *parashah* also makes very clear, painfully clear, that the Hebrew Bible distinguishes between the

historical experience of the Israelites and of the Egyptians. The fates of these two peoples are bound together in the narrative, but the Israelites are spared God's punishments and are liberated from their bondage. The *parashah*, like much of the contextual or simple meaning of the Biblical text is binary. The Egyptians' land is devasted, not so Goshen; the Egyptians cannot see or move; there is light in Goshen—or, according to some commentators, the light is embodied within the Israelites—and they can see and move; the Egyptians' first-born children and animals are killed, but the Israelites are spared the Egyptians' curse, death in every home: כִּי־אֵין בַּיִת אֲשֶׁר אֵין־שָׁם מֵת. This categorical binary does not easily enter an American's ears and heart. It is a challenge to defend the distinctive of Jewish life, of a Jewish way of looking at and walking in the world, when as tolerant democratic Americans we value all human beings and aspire to create a society of equality, not of distinction. But we are a small people, we are attached to other Jews in ways that we are not attached to other nations or peoples, and we maintain our distinctiveness to survive. Steeped in centuries of difference, we resist total homogenization. We Jews remain counter-cultural.

Let me now briefly link the themes of freedom and obligation and distinction and collective identity to your upcoming marriage. You know I had to get to it eventually.

A good relationship gives one freedom. No more bad dates, no more APPS, no more disastrous setups, no more lonely nights, no more rejections, no more looking. But, with that freedom comes the obligation to cherish someone else, to stand by them, to agree to compromise, to share in the work of maintaining the relationship in all the parameters of an adult life. To become a "we," not just an "I." A marriage is not about license. It is about the freedom that comes with commitment. The *parashah*'s emphasis on the distinction of the Israelites viz the Egyptians is also apposite to a marriage. Biblical Israel struggled with the demands of being distinctive, of being a people devoted to the Torah and to God; in fact, the narrative after the Exodus from Egypt for much of the rest of *sefer Shemot*, *Vayikra*, and *Bamidbar* details the complaining of the Israelites who don't want to be distinctive. Stiff-necked and stubborn, they want to return to the "fleshpots of Egypt." But distinct they must be, and, so, too, must you be in your marriage. One of the challenges of marriage is protecting your individuality as you become, more and more, a couple: "Ezra and Jessie: Jezra." At different moments in your future, you will need to prioritize just the two of you, at other times, you will have to prioritize your individual selves and needs. And, as you've already noticed in the wedding's and *aufruf*'s planning, there are a lot of other people whom your marriage affects, people whom you love and to whom you have obligations. But, your distinctiveness, your

**separateness as a couple, is necessary to cultivate, necessary to nurture, and necessary to protect as you negotiate bringing two families together, the Marxes and the Sinkoff/Dreiblatts, the West Coast and the East.**

**All of us who know and love you both are so confident that you will meet all the challenges of the revolutionary change in your lives—an "Exodus" from your single selves—as you marry and start to build a *beit bi-yisra'el*, a Jewish home, in our very complicated world.**

Dvar Torah January 14, 1984-Beshalach

I am not unmindful of the fact that a great deal of significance takes place in this parsha. Nevertheless, I take as my text for this sermon Exodus 13:19- "And Moses took with him the bones of Joseph, who had exacted an oath from the children of Israel, saying, 'God will surely remember you: then you shall carry up my bones from here with you.'"

On Shabbos Chaye Sarah, the darshan spoke of the bucolic atmosphere of that parshah, suggesting that Abraham was at home among the Hittites and that his request to purchase a burial place for Sarah was respectfully received. I disagreed, seeing Abraham having to turn to heathens for a burial place for his beloved wife and being publicly manipulated and shamed into paying an extortionate sum as a dramatic expression of being a stranger in a strange land. However, in listening to that dvar Torah, attending to the thoughts evoked in me by it and in speaking with the darshan during Kiddush, this dvar Torah was born, and in that I saw a dramatic expression of being at home in one's homeland.

We have here, in Minyan M'at, created for ourselves a Reed Sea-wall of security, warmth, consistency, acceptance and Yiddishkeit against a tide of rootlessness, aimlessness and facelessness that lies without. Just as in the way that one person may give a dvar Torah which inspires another with the germ of an idea for a dvar Torah which may sometime later enter into someone else's conversation which may one day influence someone else's behavior which may eventually reappear in a bar mitzvah speech, so we are creating our own communal environment, spirit and continuity. Though the members of Minyan M'at may not always be on intimate terms and, indeed, there may be newcomers whose names are not yet well known, yet faces are always eagerly sought out and recognized on Shabbos. Though, for most of us, the members of the Minyan may not be seen often, or at all, during the week, yet coming here and seeing each other here, in this context, each Shabbos is the anchoring point of the week without which we would drift off course.

Throughout the Bible, but most especially in Genesis and Exodus, we see the workings and direction of "God in history." We see the movement from the formless void to the Creation of the world and humankind, we hear the promise made to Abraham and the beginning of the fulfillment of that promise with the Exodus and we participate in the ongoingness of the fulfillment in our day and in our way here in this minyan. If that sounds a bit grandiose, it is only because we do not often permit ourselves to perceive just how clearly true it is. On Pesach we strive to feel as if we, ourselves, were freed from the Egyptian bondage. Each Shabbos, here, we continue to carry Joseph's bones to their final spiritual resting place.

This theme of graves and bones and resting places and promises appears repeatedly: in Genesis 47:29-30: "And when the time approached for Israel to die, he summoned his son Joseph and said to him, 'Do me this favor, place your hand under my thigh as a pledge of your steadfast

loyalty: please do not bury me in Egypt. When I lie down with my fathers, take me up from Egypt and bury me in their burial place;'" and in Genesis 50: 24-25: "At length, Joseph said to his brothers, 'I am about to die. God will surely remember you and bring you up from this land to the land which he promised on oath to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.' So Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, 'When God will indeed remember you, you shall carry up my bones from here.'" Moses' statement with which I began is remarkably faithful to the original. The book of Joshua in 24:32 honors this tradition: "And the bones of Joseph, which the children of Israel brought up out of Egypt, buried they in Shechem, in the parcel of ground which Jacob bought of the sons of Hamor the father of Shechem for a hundred pieces of money; and they became the inheritance of the children of Joseph."

Throughout these citations we find a pledge made by one generation to a previous generation, a promise taken on as a communal responsibility regarding a desire to be buried among one's own and a belief in a future towards which each generation must build. All this the Israelites temporarily misunderstood and forsook when, in the terror of their still slavish souls, they said in Exodus 14:11- "Was it for want of graves in Egypt that you brought us to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, taking us out of Egypt?"

But it is not only in the abstract sense of perpetuating Jewish tradition that we continue to honor our pledge to Joseph. We do so quite concretely; the very building in which we meet, and the larger congregation of which we are part, almost ended as bones forgotten along the roadside. But this minyan contributed to the revivification of those bones. Those memorial plaques we find in this building represent Jewish bones. In our newsletter we remember the yahrtzeits of those who went before us in the larger congregation, though we may never have known them in life. We can never leave any Jewish bones behind in Mitzrayim to be forgotten.

Currently, there is considerable discussion at Ansche Chesed about whether we ought to take on a rabbi to serve various purposes especially at life cycle events. Minyan M'at members may question the need for a rabbi since we may feel that we have no difficulty in arranging for and conducting brisim, baby namings, bnei mitzvah and weddings and, therefore, we have no need of a hired rabbi to officiate. Yet the one life cycle event, the final life cycle event, which we never speak of and for which we have developed no expertise is the funeral. Despite our relative youth, we are not immortal-except collectively- and we are aging.

We have forged and continue to dynamically develop a Jewish community for ourselves. We have shared in each others' simchas; we have watched with pleasure the new members, the new marriages, the new babies. We watch out for each others' children and for each other. Though we may see each other only on Shabbos, we know that, if a problem arises, each may confidently call upon any other during the week.

Already our parents are dying and, nowadays, we are never without someone saying the mourner's kaddish. When the bulwark of our parents is gone, we are next. I cannot say that too

sadly because that is the way of the world. And the way of a Jewish community is to accept the givens of life and prepare for them.

What a shock it will be when the first of our own members dies! But the terror need not come if we make the community work as "(our) rod and (our) staff." We live out our lives, in part, through the minyan and we are made alive, in part, by the minyan and so, at the end, there can be the minyan. A funeral differs most particularly from the other life cycle events in that the bulk of the arrangements and the participation and the emotional sustenance ought to fall to the community, rather than to the bereaved family. A Chevra Kadisha is a remarkable thing in that it cares for and safeguards the very body of a minyan member. A eulogy is a remarkable thing in that it tests whether we were paying attention all along to a minyan member's life. I hope we will be as leery of passively relying on hired professionals when it comes to preparing eulogies as we have been in davening and divrei Torah. Bones should not be carried by strangers.

Matthew Arnold's *Dover Beach* has been called the first modern poem because of its psychological orientation. It speaks of loneliness, emptiness and despair. It reflects the image of the Reed Sea when it speaks of the Sea of Faith, that is religion and religious values, as no longer being enough and offers human affection as the only salvation left.

The sea is calm to-night,

The tide is full, the moon lies fair

Upon the straits;-on the French coast, the light

Gleams, and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,

Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.

Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!

Only, from the long line of spray

Where the sea meets the moon-blanch'd land,

Listen! you hear the grating roar

Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling.

At their return, up on the high strand,

Begin, and cease, and then again begin,

With tremulous cadence slow, and bring

The eternal note of sadness in.

Sophocles long ago
Heard it on the Aegean, and it brought
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
Of human misery; we
Find also in the sound a thought,
Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light.
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

How fortunate we, who are potentially the full inheritors of Arnold's modern despair, are in having Minyan M'at as a safe harbor in which we can find both meaningful religious values and human affection inextricably interwoven. It gives me great comfort, in the present, to know that when my time comes, the minyan will take care of my bones.

Howard L. Berkowitz

Beshallach: Martin Luther King, Jr. Weekend

Shabbat shalom—or, if you prefer, gut shabbos.

This weekend, we observe the 79th anniversary of the birth of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. For those in our portion of the once-great Black-Jewish coalition, it could hardly be more fitting that we also mark this weekend with a reading of Beshallach. This is pure coincidence, of course—but a coincidence so meaningful, it almost makes you believe that when the Israelites came to Elim, they actually found 12 springs of water and 70 palm trees.

Dr. King preached so often from this parsha that the historian Taylor Branch began his history of the Civil Rights years under the title "Parting the Waters." It would be a very cheerful title, if you were to think of the miracle at the Sea of Reeds simply as a triumph for the Israelites—or if you were to imagine that Dr. King was the figure that television shows us each year around this time, just a nice, old-fashioned, chubby man with a dream.

But I know the people in this room are too deeply in touch with their history to think of Dr. King as so reassuring a character. And I know you understand, as Dr. King certainly did, that there is nothing morally or intellectually painless about the story of the Sea of Reeds. So, let's be Jewish about this and get complicated.

What's the first thing we notice about the miracle at the Yam Suf? It's that the emotional tone isn't complicated at all. If you're reading just for the story, then this is a straightforward and very satisfying tale of revenge, which is distinguished mostly by its utter disregard for all limits. The point of view is that of a people who have been

wronged, a people bearing a tremendous grudge. And the action is, this people gets to see its enemies destroyed—not just the person directly responsible for the harm, but his soldiers, servants, children, cousins, in-laws, everybody, even unto Pharaoh's co-workers down at the post office. The basic impulse being indulged in this text is the urge to kill them all.

Now, the Jews are not the only people to have felt this appetite for boundless, indiscriminate slaughter. To take only one other example, chosen from the safe realm of literature, I could point to Kleist's story of Michael Kohlhaas, the honest, decent, responsible man who is wronged, and starts taking revenge, and then, having started, murders everybody in sight. This is what we sing about in Beshallach—not the deliverance, but the revenge, the horse and rider thrown into the sea, the sight of the Egyptians' corpses tossed up on the shore. Of course, we don't take this revenge ourselves. God does it for us, far more thoroughly than we ever could. And that's why we lift our voices and exalt God—because he, ish milchamah, he satisfies our bloody wishes to the point of exhaustion.

A primitive and uncomplicated human impulse; very likely a universal impulse; but an embarrassing one, when you calm down enough to recognize it. So we have midrash and custom to help remove the embarrassment. The Torah encourages us to sing at the death of the Egyptians; but midrash teaches that God chastised the angels for singing. This is a beautiful story—but, you'll have to admit, it's completely extraneous to the text, and no more troubling to the conscience than those video clips of the chubby man with the dream. At the seder, we also have the practice of spilling drops of wine, which we explain as a way of diminishing our joy because of the death of the Egyptians.

This, too, is beautiful. But, I have to tell you, that red wine always reminds me of blood, and after I've spilled it, I always lick my fingers. If we want to complicate our understanding of the story of the Yam Suf, we need to look elsewhere.

Fortunately, we don't have to go very far at all. The complications are right there in the text. And we don't need contemporary theorists to dig them out for us. Medieval Judaism has already done the work.

Let me quickly run through a group of commentaries, all of which come straight from Ramban. Please forgive the gendered language for God. This *is* medieval, and it doesn't get any more Orthodox.

Commentary number one: In the song of the sea, what is the meaning of the phrase "nora tehilot?" Ramban writes, "Fearful with praises, for God does fearful things and is praised for them, as when he wreaks vengeance on those who transgress his will and thereby helps those who serve him. God is feared through the very things for which he is praised." That's worth repeating. "God is feared through the very things for which he is praised."

Commentary number two: From later in the parsha, in the episode of the bitter water, what is the meaning of the phrase "Vayoreihu Hashem eitz"? Ramban first quotes the tradition that the tree used to sweeten the waters had a naturally bitter taste. Ramban then says the text reads "vayoreihu," meaning he instructed, because "God instructed Moses and taught him the way of the Holy One, that God sweetens the bitter with the bitter." Also worth repeating: "God sweetens the bitter with the bitter."

A third commentary: In the account of the manna, what does it mean that God says, "That I may try the people, whether they will walk in My law"? Ramban says that

the manna itself was the trial. The people had gone into a place with no food—and God made them depend on a thing that was unknown to them, which they couldn't get for themselves, and which vanished day by day. The sustenance itself was a trial.

So this is the picture that's built up, piece by piece: God challenges us, maybe even terrifies us, while being generous. God relieves our bitterness through more bitterness. God is feared through the very things for which he is praised.

Now we're getting complicated. What we are seeing here, in an authoritative tradition, is Judaism's insistence that God is indeed one. To borrow the imagery of another literary source, the creator of the lamb also made the tiger….

[Incomplete. The continuation is lost. It referred to Dr. King's repeated use of the image in Amos of justice pouring down like mighty waters and connected this passage to the revenge at the Sea of Reeds. It also quoted a sermon by Dr. King in which he spoke of how hard white people make it for Black people to love them.]

**Dvar Torah 1/29/21-R5. Judy Oppenheim**

This talk came about because Lincoln Square had a Hanukkah program titled Hanukkah, Zionism and Coca Cola. They never ended up mentioning Coca-Cola during the program, but afterwards I tried googling Hanukkah, Zionism and Coca-Cola and came across a number of articles related to how coke became kosher.

My grandfather Abraham P Hirmes was an orthodox Rabbi at Ahavat Achim in Atlanta in the 20s. In our family he was known for being the Rabbi who didn't give Coca-Cola a hashgacha (kosher certification).

Tonight, I'd like to talk about Rabbi Tobias Geffen, who did end up giving Coke hashgacha in1935 and how it happened.

Rabbi Geffen was a traditional, Orthodox rabbi from Lithuania who spoke English with a Yiddish accent but was keenly attuned to the desire of American Jews to be part of "real" American life.

He understood that Coca Cola was not just a beverage but a symbol of being American, and that the rapidly assimilating children and grandchildren of Eastern European Jews were determined to demonstrate their Americanization by drinking Coke.

According to an article in the NYT:

*To refuse to drink a Coke because it wasn't kosher shut Jews off from a Southern ritual as sacred as fried chicken and watermelon.*

Rabbi Geffen's determination to ensure that Jews could drink Coke without violating the halacha of kashrut was a high-profile example of the adjustment of the Orthodox rabbinate to modern life in America.

The ongoing attempts of Rabbis to find ways for halacha to meet the changing needs of the times has become intensely relevant this year as Covid has changed Jewish burials, shivas, davening, holiday celebrations, weddings and so much more.

The Coca-Cola story starts in 1886 when John Pemberton invented what we now know of as Coca-Cola after temperance laws forced him to make a non-alcoholic version of his French Wine Cola. It quickly became very popular.

As early as 1925, rabbis across the country wrote to Rabbi Geffen asking if he knew if Coca-Cola was truly kosher since he lived in Atlanta.

Correspondence among rabbis in the early 30s made it clear that Jews were drinking Coke and considering it kosher – and that some rabbis were even certifying it kosher. Rabbi Pardes, a prominent Chicago rabbi wrote that he had investigated the plants in Chicago and found no non- kosher ingredients.

Rabbi Geffen decided to make it his mission to find out whether Coca-Cola's formula contained any items that would make it non-kosher. No simple task since the Coca-Cola recipe was, and remains, top-secret.

Rabbi Geffen knew Harold Hirsch, Coca-Cola's lead attorney. They met after attending the high school graduation of their daughters. Hirsch was so impressed by Rabbi Geffen's daughter Helen, the valedictorian, that he paid her tuition to the University of Georgia.

With Hirsch's help, Rabbi Geffen was eventually granted permission to became one of a very small group of people allowed to see the secret list of ingredients. Rabbi Geffen was sworn to secrecy – he could not get specific if his fellow rabbis wanted to know the exact ingredients. His eventual Halachic responsum is filled with initials and code words that refer to various ingredients.

Once Rabbi Geffen saw what went into Coca-Cola, he needed help deciphering exactly what those ingredients were. His daughter Helen, now majoring in chemistry in college, told her father that there were two that posed halachic problems: glycerin year-round and corn on Pesach.

The glycerin was derived from non-kosher animals. Even though it was present in only one part of 1,000 (far less than the "batel b'shishim" one part in sixty that is considered nullified for kashrut purposes if added unintentionally), because it was a planned ingredient Rabbi Geffen found it unacceptable.

Presumably not to miss out on the opportunity to expand into even the relatively small market of observant American Jews, Coca-Cola began to research what they could do.

They realized they could switch to glycerin made from cottonseed and coconut oil and they also agreed to manufacture Coke with beet and cane sugar during the several weeks before Passover to avoid the kitniyot problem.

Rabbi Geffen issued this responsum in 1935:

*Because Coca-Cola has already been accepted by the general public, and because it has become an insurmountable problem to induce the great majority of Jews to refrain from partaking of this drink, I have tried earnestly to find a method of permitting its usage. With the help of G-d I have been able to uncover a pragmatic solution in which there would be no question nor any doubt concerning the ingredients of Coca-Cola. "It is now possible for the most stringent Halachist to enjoy Coca-Cola".*

According to the Atlanta Historical Journal:

*His teshuva is a fascinating statement of his view of the role of the rabbinate at that time. Rather than just opposing the other Rabbis and saying Coke wasn't kosher he worked to find a solution to make it kosher.*

*That year, the Coca-Cola bottling plant in Atlanta produced the first bottle cap that included a kosher certification in Hebrew, along with the date and Rabbi Geffen's name. Later, yellow bottle caps indicated that the Coke had been made with cane sugar and was kosher for Passover.*

*This change did make some waves. Nazi sympathizer Karl Flach, who manufactured a German rival to Coca-Cola, returned from the U.S. carrying Coca-Cola caps stamped "Kosher for Passover" on them. A picture of the caps appeared in Nazi propaganda to fuel the belief that Jews had too much influence in the U.S. The director of Coca-Cola's operations in Germany pushed for Hirsch to be removed from Coca-Cola's board but Coca-Cola stood by Hirsch.*

Thanks to Rabbi Geffen one of the most popular and enduring symbols of America could complement the religious values of American Jews, and Jews did not have to give up on the joys of being American in order to remain true to their religion and heritage.

His Rabbinic supervision of Coke became an early model of ways in which the Orthodox rabbinate adjusted to changing circumstances to serve the Jewish community in America.

A few footnotes to this story:

- My grandfather left Atlanta in the late 20s when he was considered too old school for his modernizing congregation (Ahavat Achim)
- My Aunt in Baltimore who was born in Atlanta always served Coke in glass pitchers on Shabbat – no plastic bottles were allowed on the Shabbat table

Parashat Yitro, 1980-

© "On Shabbos, Parenting, W. Winnicott and the Sefas Emes"

I'd like to speak, albeit somewhat in a broad manner, about the relationship between the fourth and fifth commandments, and make some comments about the connection between shabbas and parenting. Chazal (the rabbis) of course viewed the successive ordering of these two commandments as having legislative significance with their statement that a child does not have to respect his parents in the case wherein which they demand breaking of the sabbath. My concern however is with the dynamic interplay between mother and infant, and Shabbos and the six remaining days of the week, the six days of work, and elucidating how the themes of BEING and DOING run through both of these relationships, particularly the mother child relationship. And secondly I would like to suggest that [illegible], Shabbas in many ways serves to parent us as individuals and as a community, and serves as a kind of developmental matrix out of which the Jewish personality grows.

For me personally, Shabbas has taken on new depth since the birth of our son Yossika, for it is the first day in the week that I am able to become a full time father. The nature of my work schedule forces me to put various kinds of restraints on incredibly strong feelings of love and desire to be with my son, and I have to be satisfied with all too brief and fleeting enocuounters, which end up being marred by frequent departures from home. However, come shabbas, the floodgates of fatherly love are opened - I'm free at last. It has never been easy for me to get to schul on time on shabbas because I so enjoy the release from the workday schedule, and it is even more difficult for me now that we are a family of three. Being together in a non pressured way simply feels too good to interrupt. The lion the Shulchan

Aruch enjoins me to find in myself early in the morning is easily tamed by Yossika. Alas, saying birchot hashacar with the community remains a distant memory.

Be that as it may... My thoughts about the relationship between parenting and Shabbas come out of my reading of two British analysts, DW Winnicott and Harry Guntrip, and the Sfas Emes of the Gerer Rebbe. The couch in Enlgand and the shtible in Poland seem to be world's apart, yet I often have the uncanny feeling when reading these two thinkers that they are really closet chasidim.

Winnicott is seminal in his discussions of the early mother child relationship and was one of the first thinkers to give primacy to this relationship and to underscore that the self essentially grows out of a dyadic rather than triadic relationship. Long before Oedipus arrives, the major foundations of personality been laid down. One of Winnicotts better known statements [15] that in fact there is no such things as a baby - only a baby and its primary caretaker. The ultimate accomplishment of Winnicott's "good enough" mother is to give the child a strong sense of BEING.

For Winnicott, being is the ultimate experience of security, and of realness that grows out of the infant's experience of being related to and tended by a caretaker who is superbly attutned to the infant's needs and desires. But even more than providing for the child, the mother serves as a presence who is "there" for the child as a result of making real emotional contact with him or her. Guntrip suggests that the image here is not so much of the mother offering her breast to give her child food and nourishment,

but of the infant leaning against or lying uupon the breast, satisfied, secure in knowing that he or she is protected, and that he or she exists because the breast exists. Slowly, this experience of Being at one with the matennal source of life is being etched deep into the unconcious of the infant. The infant is whole, alive, because he is connected to his mother. Cut of this process of identification of the child with his mother's relaity will eventually emerbe a sense of his or her own separate reality, as a result ofhaving developed a corxe sense of Being.

Shabbas is clearly the core of the Jewish week. This is externally reflected in the often quoted statement that shabbas has a name, an individual identity, while the other six days of the week are known simply by their numerical order of succession. But Shabbas as an experience brings us back to Maaseh Breishit, the very beginning, a time of wholeness of connectedness, which is characterized by רצא ושוב, the mystery of unity. The Sfas Emes, commenting on a Rashi, speaks of Shabbas as completeing the world not as a result of there having been a specific creation, but as a result of having introduced shvita, cessation of work, calm, Being if you will, into the world. He speaks of this shvita, this sense of Being, as the driving force of elverything else that was created, because it leads to a state of being ultimately connected to God as a result of being aware of having been created." The Jew discovers his שורש, his root. In the words of the Sfas Emes,

שמיתה זו היא קיום כל הבראים.
שעיל [illegible] המנוחה נתברר שיש עליהם אדון מושל.

The ministrations f God during the six days of the week, his active feeding and nurturuing, become important ultimately in that they lead to Shvita. Our cessation of work allows us to identify with God, and in the process get in touch with what the Sfas Emes after the Kabbalists calls :cheeyot," the primal life force of Being. Shabbas then is the point in the Jew's life that ultimately affirms and gives reality to the Jew's life in a manner similar to the mother Being giving birth ~~there and for her infant~~. to the infant's sense of BEING.

Winnicott describes the quality of being as a product of the feminine element of personality. He describes this feminine element as signifying the capacity to feel with, and then, feel for someone. Essentially he is talking about the capactiy to be receptive and empathic. This feminine ~~[illegible]~~ part of the personality gains knowledge via feeling and identification. Communication in this mode is absolutely personal and and basically non-verbal. His ultimate example of this state is what he calls "primary maternal preoccupation," the mother's intuitive knowledge and attonement to ~~of~~ her child's needs.

He contrasts this with the masculine element which is typffied by doing, by engaging in activity that does something do a person or an object. Thus the mother actively engaged in breast feeding her child is involved in what Winnicott calls uising the male element breast. In this mode of relating, knowledge is gained via analysis and thinking. Communication is on a verbal level.

(5)

Winnicott clearly states that these terms are in no way genitally bound or prescriptive of role definition. In fact, he is very clear that the whole person needs to be based on an integration of feminine and masculine elements. Being however is seen as feminine as it originates with the mother in the time of pregnancy during which she can do little for the child except "Be." This physical Being for naturally leads to a psychic Being for. Clearly at many points in the child's life the mother needs to Do for him or her, just as the father needs to Be for the child. Nonetheless, the mother's primacy in this area leads Winnicott to call it Being feminine, and and label it as the foundation of the self.

Now I think it is surely no coincidence that most of the imagery of Shabbas is focussed on feminine archtypes, particularly the Queen, who is symbolic of security and permanence, of steadfastness. The Queen is a nurturing presence who guarantees continuity and saftey. In the land of the Queen there are no fears- and thus the Jew rests safely. It seems to me as well that the ultimate expeiencing of shabbas, the sensing of both the neshama yetara, the extra soul, and gaining a sense of meeyn olam haba, paradise, are both very characteristic of Winnicott's feminine element, as they are both realized in a very intutitive, essentially non-verbal, nonrational and extrememly personal maner. Both require the person to place him or herself in an extremely receptive position for these transformations to take place.

Winnicott describes how the provision of a nondemanding presence by the mother, and the refraining from placing impingements on the child, and ~~and this~~ the enhancement of Being, and allowing the child to gradually experience his or her own needs and spontaneous desires.

In his language, Doing naturally flows from Being. The child secure in his relationships and thus in his or her own existence naturally and freely explores impulses towards discovery and groeth. Being and Doing are thus complementary, and feed off of each other.

A very similar kidd of relationship exists between Shabbas and the six days of the week, where successful and meaningful doing during the week finds its source in shabbas, accoriding the the sfas emes. He comments on rashis explanation of the verse"and God blessed the seventh day." Rashi explains that he blessed it and sanctified it with the manna. This is puzzling though since no manna fell on the seventh day. Basing himself on a passage from the Zohar, the Sfas emes answers that the blessing of manna during the six days depend and arise out of the seventh day. Shabbas nurtures the week days, and is never absent during the week, typified by the mitsvah to remember it every day.

Winnicott lays the ultimate source of personal distress as resulting from what he calls "the split off female element." The child who has been impinged upon to a degree that he or she is forced to become responsive to outside needs and demands, is forced to abandons his or her inner core of experience. Thus the feminine sense of Being is disturbed. When the healthy female element becomes dissociated, the healthy male element as well becomes lost and disturbed. Caricatures of being and doing follow from this situation, what Winnicott calls pseudo female and pseudo male elements. Passivity and weakness adorn themselves as Being, while toughness, aggressiveness, destructiveness, and

a compulsive drive towards fierce activity pass for Doing. In truth all of these qualities are reactive attempts to make up for lost Being, and of course are doomed to failure, for emptiness surely needs to be filled, not covered up.

Clearly the Sfas Emes would claim that the person who fails to keep shabbas is fated to an incomplete life, for without it he would say that a primary sense of Being is lost. I think ultimately that the Sfas Emes is too limiting here. ~~I'm really not interested in entering into that polemic, as~~ Certainly there are other ways of experiencing BEING ~~that question is not important to me~~. What does interest me however is that Shabbas does create for us, in Winnicott's terminology, a "facilitating environment" by limiting endless BOING. Shabbas is thus a kind of parent to us and leads us to a part of ourselves that needs to be continually rexperienced and nurtured, and in so doing provides a model for ways we need to be and live with our children.

**Mishpatim - January 29, 2022**

I'm focusing today on the case in Mishpatim – 22:21 -25 - of the pregnant woman who miscarries after being knocked down by two men fighting. The resolution of the case is payment of damages to the woman's husband; it is not treated as a capital case liable to the death penalty because the fetus is not considered a person. When I talked about this case a few years ago, I knew the Church has a different view of the legal status of the fetus, but I was stunned that the Biblical prooftext for this status is *Jeremiah's* inaugural text – *"The word of the Lord came to me: Before I created you in the womb, I selected you."* In Jewish tradition, this is understood metaphorically, suggesting how well suited Jeremiah is to his prophetic role, but for the Church it is understood literally: attributing a role for God in conception, an understanding that prohibits abortion in almost every case.

I decided to return to this issue since the existing laws that protect a woman's right to choose are quite likely to change dramatically in many states. I also find it particularly troubling that several Supreme Court justices have expressed themselves as devout Catholics and at least one – Justice Amy Coney Barrett – spoke some years ago to graduates of the Notre Dame law school (which she had attended) in the following words:

"I'm just going to identify one way in which I hope that you, as graduates of Notre Dame, will fulfill the promise of being a different kind of lawyer. And that is this: that you will always keep in mind that your legal career is but a means to an end, and as Father Jenkins told you this morning, that end is building the kingdom of God. You know the same law, are charged with maintaining the same ethical standards, and will be entering the same kinds of legal jobs as your peers across the country. But if you can keep in mind that your fundamental purpose in life is not to be a lawyer, but to know, love, and serve God, you truly will be a different kind of lawyer."

There is of course debate about the intent of these words now that she is on the Court. But I've never been comfortable with the phrase "Judeo-Christian tradition" because there are many, many significant differences in the two traditions. As I worked on this presentation, I kept reminding myself that the so-called "Old Testament" is not the same as the Hebrew Bible. Rather, the Old Testament conforms to fundamental Christian "truths". It should not be surprising that the issue of abortion is addressed in other texts from the Hebrew Bible; not only the text from Jeremiah. So I'd like to start by looking at a few texts from the Hebrew Bible that are understood in a distinctly different way in the Catechism of the Catholic Church. And then we will look at a few Jewish texts about abortion.

# NOTES:

*Read Chapter 21:22-25 and then 23:7, rather than the 5th commandment – "You shall not murder." The important use of this verse is the emphasis on "innocence".

*A straight line of the Church's position on abortion although further support for the position are metaphorical citations from the Tanakh.

Jeremiah 5: "Before I created you in the womb, I selected you; Before you were born, I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet concerning the nations."

Psalm 139:15, etc.

NEXT – Go lightly over the variation in the rules pertaining to abortion over time, keeping in mind that little could be done to save a baby given the limits to medical science in these times.

## Text #! - Catechism of the Catholic Church: The Fifth Commandment

### The Witness of Sacred History: Abortion

**#2261** – Scripture specifies the prohibition contained in the fifth commandment: *"Keep far from a false charge; do not bring death on those who are innocent and in the right, for I will not acquit the wrong doer."* ***Exodus 23:7***

The deliberate murder of an innocent person is gravely contrary to the dignity of the human being, to the golden rule, and to the holiness of the Creator. The law forbidding it is universally valid: it obliges each and everyone.

**#2270** – Human life must be respected and protected absolutely from the moment of conception. From the first moment of his existence, a human being must be recognized as having the rights of a person – among which is the inviolable right of every innocent being to life. ***Jeremiah 1:4*** – *"The word of the Lord came to me: Before I created you in the womb, I selected you."*

*Psalm 139:15* -- *"My frame was not concealed from You when I was shaped in a hidden place, knit together in the recesses of the earth."*

*Job 10:8-12* – *"Your hands shaped and fashioned me, Then destroyed every part of me. Consider that You fashioned me like clay; Will you then turn me back into dust? You poured me out like milk, Congealed me like cheese."*

*Psalm 22:10-11* -- *"You drew me from the womb, made me secure at my mother's breast."*

#2271 – Since the first century the Church has affirmed the moral evil of every procured abortion. This teaching has not changed and remains unchangeable. Direct abortion, that is to say, abortion willed either as an end or a means, is gravely contrary to the moral law. *You shall not kill the embryo by abortion and shall not cause the newborn to perish.* Am 8:4-10

#2272 – Formal cooperation in an abortion constitutes a grave offense. The Church attaches the canonical penalty of excommunication to this crime against human life.

#2274 – Since it must be treated from conception as a person, the embryo must be defended in its integrity, cared for and healed, as far as possible, like any other human being.

#2275 – It is immoral to produce human embryos intended for exploitation as disposable biological materials.

**Texts #2 - Jewish Texts Regarding the Fetus and Abortion**

**Exodus 21:22-25:** When men fight, and one of them pushes a pregnant woman and a miscarriage results, but no other damage ensues, the one responsible shall be fined accordingly as the woman's husband may exact from him, 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.

**Mishnah Ohalot 7:6:** If a woman has [life-threatening] difficulty in childbirth, the embryo within her should be dismembered limb by limb, because her life takes precedence over its life. If its head (or its greater part) has emerged, it may not be touched, for we do not set aside one life for another.

**Sanhedrin 72b (Gemara's discussion of the Mishnah):** Rav Hisda challenges the position of the Mishnah by claiming that since the child whose birth threatens the mother's life is a pursuer (*rodef*), he can be killed even if the greater part of the child has emerged. However, the Gemara answers that the mother is being "pursued by Heaven", i.e. that her life is being endangered by the natural phenomenon of childbirth rather than by the child itself, and therefore the child's life cannot be taken once he/she has emerged from the womb since we do not "push aside one person's life on account of another person's life."

**Rashi (on Sanhedrin 72b):** The fetus is considered as born once the head has emerged and that is why the child cannot be destroyed to save the other's life after this point (i.e. the point at which the fetus "becomes a person or individual life".)

**Maimonides (on Sanhedrin 72b): The** Rambam insists that the child is a "pursuer". This view is more stringent than Rashi's because it would permit abortion only where there is a clear danger to the life of the mother prior to the head emerging. Rashi's argument rests on the fact that only in the case where the fetus will cause the mother's death can there be an abortion before the point at which the head emerges.

**Shulhan Arukh: Yoreh Deah** 194:10: Once the forehead, or the greater part of the head, has emerged from the womb, one may not reject one life in favor of another. Abortion, even in cases where the fetus is expected to be born with a considerable mental or physical defect or malformation, abortion is to be discouraged.

**Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Conservative Movement** – 1983 – "An abortion is justifiable if a continuation of pregnancy might cause the mother severe physical or psychological harm, or when the fetus is judged – by competent medical opinion – as severely defective." While it is clear that therapeutic abortions are permissible, the most significant difference of opinion within the Jewish community revolves around the question of what constitutes a therapeutic abortion.

## TEXT SHEET #3 – Bringing Elements of the Tanakh into the New Testament

**Ruth – Chapter 4 (as it appears in Tanach)**

18 This is the line of Perez: Perez begot Hezron, 19 Hezron begot Ram, Ram begot
Amminadab, 20 Amminadab begot Nahshon, Nahshon begot Salmon, 21 Salmon begot Boaz,
Boaz begot Obed, 22 Obed begot Jesse, and Jesse begot David.

**MATTHEW, Chapter 1 -** *The ancestry of the Messiah* (The text of Ruth is in **BOLD**)

1 This is **the genealogy of** *Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham:*
*2 Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, 3 Judah the father of* **Perez** *and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar,* **Perez the father of Hezron, Hezron the father of Ram, 4 Ram the father of Amminadab, Amminadab the father of Nahshon, Nahshon the father of Salmon, 5 Salmon the father of Boaz,** *whose mother was Rahab,* **Boaz** the father of Obed, *whose mother was Ruth,* **Obed the father of Jesse, 6** and **Jesse the father of** *King* David.

***What follows in Matthew are the names of all the kings of Judah as found in Second Kings***

David was the father of Solomon **7 Solomon** the father of Rehoboam, **Rehoboam** the father of Abijah, Abijah the father of Asa, **8 Asa** the father of Jehoshaphat, **Jehoshaphat** the father of Jehoram, Jehoram the father of Uzziah, **Uzziah** the father of Jotham, **Jotham** the father of Ahaz, **Ahaz** the father of

Hezekiah, **10 Hezekiah** the father of Manasseh, **Manasseh** the father of Amon, **Amon** the father of Josiah, **11** and **Josiah** the father of **Jeconiah** and his brothers at the time of the exile to Babylon.

***(These are names from the Tanach that appear randomly in Matthew)***
**12** After the exile to Babylon: Jeconiah was the father of Shealtiel, Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel, **13** Zerubbabel the father of Abihud, Abihud the father of Eliakim, Eliakim the father of Azor, **14** Azor the father of Zadok, Zadok the father of Akim, Akim the father of Elihud, **15** Elihud the father of Eleazar, Eleazar the father of Matthan, Matthan the father of Jacob, **16** and Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, and Mary was the mother of Jesus who is called the Messiah. **17** Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Messiah.

***This story is unique to Matthew!***
**18** This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. **19** Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. **20** But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, *"Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. **21** She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."* **22** All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: **23** "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us"). **24** When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife, but had no intercourse with her until her son was born. And he named the child Jesus.

**Verse 23 is from Isaiah 7:14 – "Assuredly, my Lord will give you a sign of his own accord! Look the young woman is with child and about to give birth to a son. Let her name him Imma*

## *LOOK AT THE TEXT SHEETS – Christian texts/Jewish texts

### First Century

There is an array of opinions about the followers of Jesus in the early 1st century of the Common Era and particularly about the extent of Jewish involvement. Jerusalem teemed with believers in Greek and Roman pagan traditions and the Jewish community was increasingly diverse, including Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Sicarii, Cohanim, Levites and Jews like Josephus who was well connected in GraecoRoman society. Jews had both the Hebrew and Greek versions of the Tanakh so they could relate stories about Elijah and Elisha to non-Jews in Greek since those stories are quite similar to those about Jesus in the New Testament, miracle workers who can resurrect the dead and defeat the most troubling of God's enemies, quite relevant in First Century Palestine. Familiarity with Jewish texts also contributed to promoting stories about a Messiah, the heir of King David with whom God had made an eternal covenant. We can see in the writings

of the Apostles – particularly Matthew and Mark - that they must have relied on new Christians from the Jewish community for the Jewish texts they used in their melding with the new understandings that emerged in the first century. A narrative of the life of Jesus was composed in the later years of the century by an unknown author. This material was recast by Mark who came from a so-called Jewish/Christian community but it was put together by Matthew, a Greek speaker from Syria, who was given pride of place as we will see in the opening verses of his work. *Mark comes next, followed by *Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, two volumes said to be "written by a Christian intellectual". *John is the last of the four Apostles who is also said to come from a Jewish/Christian community. So while the work of these early followers of Jesus was circulating, they were not available for Latin speakers until the early 5th century, thanks to the Vulgate, a translation of Jerome from the Greek.

**LOOK AT MATTHEW TEXT**

A question I'd like to raise but I have no hope of answering is why the early followers of Jesus chose to connect their particular texts to the Jewish texts that were largely canonized by the 2nd century. Why was it necessary for Matthew to open the New Testament with the genealogy of Joseph that placed him in the Davidic line even though the Christian reading of Isaiah is that Jesus's mother was a virgin. Clearly, some of those who were living in the very diverse land of Israel in the first few centuries of the Common Era cared very deeply that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit should be connected to the David with whom God had announced an eternal covenant. The identities of those who cared about this issue – were they early Christians? Jews for Jesus (if you will)? Or any of those groups that made Israel a multi ethnic land. By the time the books of the New Testament were circulating in the land, the division between Jews and Christians was probably pretty clear and soon after the Church became the arbiter of Catholic practice which eventually was written down as a Cathecism.

The irony is that however many ancient Jews were drawn to the idea of a son of God, crucified for the sake of salvation for all who come to believe in him, Judaism survives. We are told that the Roman authorities allowed a group of rabbis to work together at Yavneh, a small community outside of Jerusalem after the destruction of the Temple to deal with the consequences for Jewish life. What emerges from rabbinic Judaism in the early 3rd century, is the Mishnah which lays down the basic precepts for Jewish law and practice upon which generations to come will build.

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**Mishpatim: Anniversary of the birth of James Joyce**

Shabbat shalom—or gut shabbos, as the case may be.

A couple of weeks ago, during our mega-issues dinner, the topic of Jewish continuity came up and aroused a little heat. That's not a surprise. I figure Jews will probably argue about continuity forever.

So I thought I'd do it myself today. My theme is Jewish continuity—or, more precisely, why we should care if Jews go on as a people. What's the good of our continuity? For what purpose do we exist as Jews?

Let's set aside the plausible but limited explanation that we exist, like all beings, for the sake of our existence itself. As some of you know, Bali and I have a garden in our back yard, and right now the perennials are withered stumps. But in May, they'll be spreading and blossoming again, because they're perennials, and that's what they do. I think it's fine to stop asking questions there—if you're a plant. If you have human capacities, you probably should use them and look for a better answer.

That's something parshat Mishpatim helps us to do. As I intend to show, it provides at least a partial basis for deciding why Jews should continue to exist.

The coincidence this year of Shabbat Mishpatim with February 2 makes the inquiry even more promising—because today, on the Western calendar, is the 137th anniversary of the birth of James Joyce, zichrono l'vracha, the only writer in English to rival Shakespeare, and unlike Shakespeare a philosemite. Among the great modernists, Joyce was the *only* philosemite. I'm going to propose that Reb Yainkel Sosson can give us some guidance on the question before us, in conjunction with Mishpatim.

Now, I know of an ancient explanation for why we have to continue, and I know of a modern, peculiarly American one. The ancient explanation is that God designated us to offer sacrifices, and to keep ourselves ritually fit to do it. That's our job, our avodah. Unfortunately, we've had to make do for the past 2,000 years with a work-around, but the basic purpose hasn't changed. We're set aside for ritual service. For many centuries Jews felt this explanation was good enough, and it's still sufficient today for many of our people. I don't want to argue with them, and I don't want to belittle their beliefs, but for me, this isn't satisfying.

And neither, for me, is a prevalent American explanation. Jews should continue to exist because of something called Jewish values. Here we get into parshat Mishpatim. According to a modern way of thinking, Mishpatim is chock full of Jewish values.

Again, I don't want to belittle anyone's beliefs. But I do want to explain why I object.

The first reason is that my mind starts to spin when I hear people talk about Jewish values. Do other people *not* have values? For example, do the Norwegians believe that it's good to rob and murder? Maybe during Viking times, but probably not even then. Do Muslims think it's good to hoard everything for yourself? Of course not. They insist on charity. They just call it sadaqa, instead of tzedakah.

Maybe I'm overly sensitive, but I detect an unpleasant sense of superiority when I hear talk about special Jewish values, a kind of moral preening. But that's the lesser of my reasons for feeling unhappy with this explanation for our purpose. The larger reason is that when I read Mishpatim, it's hard for me to find values at all.

What I find, instead, is a string of circumstances and examples—not jurisprudence, but case law. Scholars have done wonders by comparing these cases to those found in other ancient Middle Eastern legal codes and teasing out differences in emphasis and atittude. But it seems to me that there are no theories of right and wrong here, except the ones you make up on your own by generalizing from these specifics. We are not dealing here with Greeks, who invented a language of abstractions that could articulate principles. It seems to me that the ancient Hebrews were more like the Brazilian tribes studied by Lévi-Strauss—people who reason in terms of concrete objects and kin relationships, which they say are "good to think with."

So I'm skeptical about jumping to values as the purpose of Jewish life. And this is where James Joyce comes to back me up.

If you're obsessive enough to spend time with *Finnegans Wake*—if you have enough patience for the book, and enough of a sense of the absurd—you will discover that the text incorporates an explanation for its own existence. Or, rather, there are two competing explanations. The first is that the words you're reading are echoes of the great Word, which came from the skies in a momentous thunderclap. The other explanation is that you're reading some scraps that were scratched out of a dung heap by a hen named Biddy Doran. Although *Finnegans Wake* gives equal treatment to these two theories, I probably don't have to tell you that Joyce believed less in a thunder god than in the existence of inquisitive chickens.

Despite Joyce's reputation as a highly intellectual writer, it's very hard to find principles or general statements in his works, either. Anyone who has followed Leopold Bloom through the minutiae of June 16 knows that. Joyce believed in the nitty gritty. And

he believed in storytelling—especially in the crucial significance of its form. To read him is to understand that the shape of a story can be, ought to be, as important as any general idea you could extract from it.

Which leads me back to Mishpatim, and the place it occupies in the narrative of sefer Sh'mot.

Nobody here needs me to give a synopsis. But in order to make my point, I'm going to ask you to go back to the beginning and resist our tradition—a tradition I love—of atomizing the text and examining each particular. I'd just like to follow the narrative for a change, and will ask you to make an imaginative leap. Think of yourself as a Hebrew slave. You have always been a Hebrew slave. Your parents and grandparents were Hebrew slaves. And whatever this guy Moshe might think—this untrustworthy guy, who grew up like an Egyptian prince, and has an old murder rap hanging over him, and makes his brother do all the talking—whatever he thinks, you know you are going to die as a slave in the land of Egypt. Random violence, the occasional program of mass murder, a life of backbreaking work from which you derive nothing. That's all you know.

But then, within something like two months, look what happens. You see the Egyptians crushed by a series of inexplicable disasters, which somehow never affect the Hebrews. Death itself passes overhead without touching you. In the middle of the night, you're abruptly told to leave Egypt, which you do without even pausing to bake bread—though you've somehow got enough time to take gold and jewels from the Egyptians, who suddenly seem afraid of you. When they get up their courage again and come to drag you back, you escape captivity by walking through the middle of the sea, which rises up

on either side to let you pass—after which you watch the sea crash back down, burying every last one of your pursuers.

You think nothing more amazing will ever happen. But Moshe leads you to a mountain, where you have your wits scared out. Whatever was solid before, earth and stone, seems to melt. The air above you turns into smoke and fire. Reality breaks apart, as a voice that is terror made audible explodes above your head. Before you even know what you're doing, you run until your legs give out. You have just heard the voice of the Creator of the universe, the one and only God, speaking directly to *you*.

And after all that, what does God have to say?

God says, if you've got an ox, and it kills somebody else's ox, then you and the other guy will sell the live one and split the money, and also split the dead animal—except, of course, if you knew your ox was trouble and you didn't hold him back, in which case you'll have to give a live animal to the other guy. And he keeps the dead one, too.

Now I ask: Who the hell tells a story this way? Who makes the listener go straight from the Word of God in thunder to this scratching through the debris of ordinary life? The answer is, we Jews tell stories this way. I'm going to stick my neck out and stay, *only* we Jews would shape a narrative like this, falling off so dizzyingly from Yitro to Mishpatim.

And we're not done with the lurches. Because at the end of Mishpatim, we suddenly enter a kind of time warp and emerge back on the fourth of Sivan (if you believe Rashi), with Moshe ready to go up the mountain. Now the story has changed, though, and he goes up with seventy elders. Not twelve. That would be a representative

number, one for each tribe. Seventy is a symbolic number. It's as if to say, Moshe went up with every last Hebrew who had been named going into Egypt. He's got the entire roll call with him. We *all* see God. And now, at the end of the parsha, the highs of Yitro and the lows of Mishpatim come together—because what do we in God's presence? We eat and drink: the ultimate creaturely act, after which comes the dung heap, literally. And all the while, we are abiding with the divine vision.

To my way of thinking, we need to continue to exist as Jews because nobody else is going to tell stories this way. Trust me, you couldn't get something like this past any editor alive. But we don't just put up with our story. We read it over and over, and elaborate on it, and extend it endlessly. That's what we're good for. And I think the world needs us to do it.

Until it's time for parshat Terumah, shabbat shalom.

**Parshat Terumah, February 21, 2015**

Shabbat shalom—or gut shabbos, as the case may be.

When we left off last week, at the end of Mishpatim, a few of the most trusted Israelites had been granted a vision of God's feet in the heavens above Mt. Sinai, and they saw that God has a really nice tiled floor. You can't get anything like that around here. But now he Israelites are going to have to do the best they can, because this week they learn that God intends to dwell among them: "v'shachanti b'tocham." The verb, if I understand it correctly, has the connotation of a nomad taking shelter in a tent—which is what we might expect of a God whose permanent home has a floor of pure sapphire. Hashem will be roughing it with us—but even so, we can't prepare just any tent for God. Much is required of us, despite our inadequacy of materials, skill and understanding.

What are the implications here, about what it means to serve God, and what it means to be in God's presence? Those are the questions I mean to address for the next ten minutes.

First, though, I need to dispose of a familiar metaphor, which comes to mind much too easily when we read Terumah.

St. Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin and the Ancient and Accepted Order of Freemasons—authorities seldom quoted in our minyan—all speak of the Creator as the Architect of the Universe. There are different theological possibilities in this metaphor, but they all draw upon the availability of the word "architect" and its root image in Greek: the first maker, or, in more humble terms, the first worker to come onto the building site. Biblical Hebrew and the Jewish tradition do not give us this word, this image, this concept of creation or, to be honest, much architecture.

You will recall that when Solomon built the Temple, he had to go out-of-state to hire the consultants. Our people could do a parapet around the roof of a house—in fact, they *had* to do a parapet around the roof of a house—but anything complicated, like a temple, was way beyond their capability. You could ascribe this lack of advanced design skills to the social and material conditions of ancient Israel—what I might call its *Waiting for Guffman* problem—but it must also have had something to do with our notion of the Creator, who is emphatically not a worker on a construction site. Our God does everything by verbal fiat. Only on the sixth day is there a question of God's hands getting dirty, and then it's to do something like the work of a sculptor, or surgeon. The Jews' God is not the architect of the universe.

Even if we imagine that the mishkan, as described in Parshat Terumah, is a scale model of the heavenly abode, we have to keep in mind the radical difference between God's creative acts and our work as builders. To put this difference in present-day terms, just for a minute, let me pass along a story that was told to me by Richard Meier, a Jewish architect who would never design anything that could be called Jewish architecture.

Some of you might know that in the early 1960s, when Meier was just getting started in his career, he organized an exhibition at the Jewish Museum of contemporary architectural designs for synagogues. The backstory, as he explained it to me, is that he was hanging around with Alan Solomon, a curator of the most up-to-date contemporary art, who at the time was the director of the Jewish Museum. One day Solomon said to Meier, with some agitation, "My trustees keep pushing me to show something Jewish. What the hell am I going to do?" Meier said, "Why don't you do a show of synagogue

architecture? Louis Kahn has designed a synagogue for these people in Philadelphia, and they're giving him a hard time. Maybe if you show his design, the synagogue will get built."

That's why the exhibition was planned. And here's the point. A while later, Meier went to visit the painter Barnett Newman in his studio. When Newman heard about the exhibition, he said, "Oh! You know, *I* designed a synagogue. You ought to put it in your show." Meier said, "Show me." So Newman took a paper napkin from a deli and drew his synagogue. He said, "Look, it's a baseball diamond. The ark is home plate. The bimah is the pitcher's mound. You put the congregation here, in the bleachers." Meier said, "OK. But I think we'll have to develop this a little." And so Meier spent several weeks turning Barnett Newman's drawing of a baseball diamond into an architectural design for a synagogue—which was difficult, he said, because Newman had no idea whatever of how to make a building stand up. Meier kept having to say, "No, Barney, the walls have to be thicker, or it just won't work."

What does this story have to do with Parshat Terumah? First, the mishkan, like Newman's synagogue of baseball, seems rational and orderly but has an essential element of fantasy. Second, the mishkan, as described, won't stand up.

First point. When a narrative is especially dense with numbers and dimensions and practical details, the mind has a tendency to rush in with a counterbalance of fantasy. I believe this is a general rule. Think of *Moby-Dick.* Melville tells you a thousand minutiae about whaling until he's completely exhausted your rational mind, and you're prepared to receive the mythic. We see something like that in the way your mind

eventually wanders from the carpentry and geometry in Terumah and starts to fill up with imaginary creatures.

One of them is the shamir. This was a worm with a kind of laser eyesight, which could cut stones any way you liked. According to legend, Solomon used a shamir to cut the stones for the Temple, so they would not be touched by a metal blade. And I learn from Rashi that a shamir was also used to incise the jewels in Aaron's priestly outfit.

The next mythical creature, unlike the shamir, is actually named in Terumah. It's the tachash, whose skin served for one of the roof coverings of the mishkan. Modern texts often translate tachash as dolphin, but some of the rabbis thought of the tachash as a zoological equivalent of manna. It lived only in the period when the mishkan was being constructed, and died out when it had supplied enough skins for the roof. I'm perfectly happy with this explanation, which makes the tachash a cousin of the unicorn. I don't think that's any less probable than the notion that the Israelite slaves fled Egypt with a ready supply of dolphin skins.

The third mythical creature in the parshah, and by far the most important, is the cherub. There are cherubs all over the Holy of Holies: on the cover of the ark, on the curtain at the entrance to the Holy of Holies, and on the first layer of the weavings that were the roof of the mishkan. Think about Aaron going into the Holy of Holies. He would have seen cherubs in front of him, cherubs behind him, and cherubs over his head, on the ceiling.

My question is, how could he have seen the cherubs over his head? The instructions first tell Moses, "Make the mishkan out of ten strips of cloth," and so forth, as if the weavings for the roof *were* the mishkan. And then, afterward, the instructions

explain how to make the boards that are the structure of the mishkan, and hold up these coverings.

There's no problem rationally. You make the coverings, you keep them to the side, and when you're ready to put up the boards, you assemble the mishkan. But that doesn't satisfy the symbolic order of the instructions. As we know, the symbolic order troubled Bezalel. According to midrash, he objected to being told first to make the Ark, the table and the menorah, and then to make the mishkan itself. The midrash has Moses replying, in effect, "Very good point, Bezalel." And in Parshat Vayakhel, we find the order reversed, the way it ought to be: first the structure, and then the furnishings. But either way, in Terumah or in Vayakhel, the roof comes before the walls. At least temporarily, we have to think about the weavings just floating there, with no support.

For this symbolic problem, I can give only a symbolic answer: The boards are intended to enclose the mishkan but not to hold up the weavings, because the roof doesn't need any support. It's carried on the wings of cherubs. That's how we can picture it, anyway. The imaginary is not just woven into the materials but takes on a structural function. Why can the cherubs do this? Because God, like Barnett Newman, is not an architect. God has a great idea for a sacred space, and it's up to somebody else to figure out how to realize it in three dimensions. But we're not allowed to say to God, as Richard Meier said to Newman, "No, look, the walls have to be thicker." God's design is the design. And even though it's the design for something here below, something comparatively humble that we're commanded to construct with our hands, there is an aspect to it that cannot be achieved by human means. The lowliest version of God's abode is fundamentally beyond our power to make real.

To go back to the beginning, we are talking about a terumah: literally, something that is set aside, something that we give up for God. One of the things we have to set aside, apparently, is the illusion that we can fully make things the way we think they ought to be. Even in a case like this, where we're commanded to make something *exactly* to specification, we need the fanciful, the miraculous, to come in and complete the job as envisioned.

So one of the things we learn about serving God is that we do it fallibly. I'm sorry to have taken you all this way just to state the obvious, but there it is. We are not expected to finish the work, but neither are we allowed to abandon it.

This is a lesson in humility. But, in a way, I also feel it's an encouragement—and it's part of what we can learn about being in God's presence. Sometimes, if we've worked very hard, we can look at something we've done—whatever might be our work in the world, but say a ceiling we've made—and even though we know it's held up by boards, we might think, that's amazing. How could I have been good enough to do *that*? It almost looks like it's floating.

Shabbat shalom.

**Terumah - 2/29/20**

"In Xanadu did Kubla Khan a stately pleasure dome decree!" Kubla Khan – the subject of Coleridge's poem – was not an Ancient Near Eastern Emperor but it was Liz's call for a darshan that brought Xanadu to mind and resulted in this drash. I'd like to think this happened because Liz is a scholar of Romantic poetry; she is Curator of Shelley and his circle at the New York Public Library, so I was in the right neighborhood with Coleridge. My ageing brain surprises me constantly.

Of course, Terumah doesn't describe a pleasure dome or the palace of a king; it describes in precise and gorgeous detail an imaginary dwelling place for the God of Israel. But why spend an entire parashah on such lavish materials that were certainly not available in the wilderness? The answer, I think, is found in the larger context of the Ancient Near East. Israel existed in a regional system of small states and large empires in which it evolved – over time – a unique religious point of view in this neighborhood of more powerful neighbors. That context - along with Israel's claim of uniqueness – explains certain literary tropes in the Torah. A few examples: like Helen of Troy, Israelite women are beautiful and imperiled by their beauty, winding up in the beds of men other than their husbands; kings instinctively understand that the God of Israel is real and powerful; even Pharaoh defers to this God repeatedly. Israelite men are always quick witted, outwitting even their own brothers, and repeatedly benefit materially from their interactions with foreign rulers. Joseph is the extreme case, succeeding brilliantly as the right-hand man of Pharaoh.

Fundamentally important to the Torah's story, of course, is the escape of the Israelites from Egyptian slavery led by their God, bringing with them the ark with the tablets of the Ten Commandments and a vast array of laws that differ significantly from those of their neighbors. In imaginatively creating a structure to "house" these laws it seems plausible that our ancient ancestors were inspired by the magnificent structures of their powerful neighbors that housed kings and Emperors, the most important figures in their cultures. Remnants of these palaces remain despite the tremendous destruction of recent violent conflicts and we have extensive evidence of these palaces in museums. But the tabernacle of our parashah – and the few that follow it in the book of Shemot – is a palace of the imagination; a meticulously designed and gorgeously arrayed structure to house the ark and the tablets throughout the years of wandering. But the description of

this tabernacle raises issues both of portability – it would have to be folded up repeatedly and carried during 40 years of wandering – and plausibility – it could not have been possible for these wandering Jews to find acacia wood, gold, silver, copper, yarns of many colors, fine twisted linen, precious stones, not to mention the tools necessary to create this tabernacle.

The luscious description of the place in which God's presence on earth will dwell reflects the vivid artistic imagination of Israelites who can only create in words the palace for their God, likely inspired by those magnificent structures of their neighbors. And these neighbors were extraordinary builders – there were the pyramids in Egypt and a series of palaces throughout the empires to the north including the Assyrian Palace of Ashurbanipal and the Babylonian Palace of Nebuchadnezzar, each the palace of an Empire, one that destroyed the Northern Kingdom in 722 BCE and the other that destroyed Solomon's Temple and carried Israelites into exile in Babylonia in 587&6.

In the Ancient Near East in the 9th through 6th centuries, Assyria and Babylonia were at the height of their power and in ongoing competition. At the same time, the Israelites were developing the idea of an omnipotent, omniscient divinity while being harassed, threatened, held under siege and ultimately overwhelmed by these far more powerful neighbors. It is the paradox of an all-powerful God of Israel and the endless suffering of the Israelites that prompts the classical prophets to insist that these neighbors were sent by God to punish the Israelites for their disobedience. In chapter 1 of Jeremiah, God asks the prophet what he sees and Jeremiah replies: "I see a boiling pot; and its face is from the north." A metaphorical boiling pot that will be spilled on Israel by the forces of Babylonia that destroy Solomon's Temple.

If you've spent time in the Assyrian Sculpture Court on the second floor of the Metropolitan Museum – or had the good fortune of seeing the exhibit at the British Museum – you have a sense of what it must have been like for Israel to be in the path of the armies of Assyria and Babylonia, that "boiling pot" pouring down again and again from the North. The sculptures at the Metropolitan once adorned the walls of the palace of the 9th century Assyrian Emperor Ashurnasipal. These extraordinary, massive stone sculptures depict the king and his attendants, supernatural figures, sacred trees and cuneiform texts carved into the stone that attest to the greatness of the king. Sennacherib, the 7th century Assyrian Emperor,

a successor of Ashurnasipal, is cited in the book of Isaiah, chapters 36&37, when his army lays siege to Jerusalem. He is credited for building programs in Nineveh, the Assyrian capitol he restored. A scholar of Assyrian art writing about the collection in the British Museum describes "two miles of bas relief" from Sennacherib's palace, showing him inspecting the booty from the Judean town of Lachish that his army held under siege in 701 BCE in their failed attempt to conquer Jerusalem. The Babylonians were also great builders. Remnants of the palace of Nebuchadnezzar whose army destroyed the First Temple and exiled many Israelites, survive to this day. Saddam Hussein was interrupted in his efforts to restore the palace as a tourist attraction.

While the Israelites might have been inspired by descriptions of the pagan palaces in Assyria and Babylonia (or may even have seen them), neither the tabernacle of Terumah or the Temple of Solomon described in today's Haftorah are palaces; rather, they are places to house the God of Israel, the ark with the tablets and other laws. Even when kingship became normative in Israel, the Temple remained God's home, not the king's. Solomon's Temple is not a palace for a human king. What it was and whether it was an actual building, might be a topic for this parashah next year.

Even if the description of the tabernacle in today's parashah seems incredible, we must give credit where it is due. While the ancient Israelites may have wanted to compete with their pagan neighbors (after all, they defiantly claimed their God was the only true God), there are no human or animal images in the tabernacle; only soft, beautiful fabrics and precious gems and exquisite woods. More of a home than a Temple! Except for this one verse which sticks out a bit: Shemot 26:31 "You shall make a curtain of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and fine twisted linen; it shall have a design of cherubim worked into it." Here we have the origins of the parochet, a magnificent fabric woven from beautiful yarns to cover the revelation of God's laws. But what about those cherubim??? "winged angelic beings"??? Of course, in the Jerusalem Temple those celestial beings would stand guard over the ark. Just a touch of paganism that passed the censors....

Our ancestors were a small people with no power but big ideas; they emerged from the Ancient Near East with a powerful legacy that was wedded to these texts. While the descriptions of the tabernacle may spring from the imagination, it is a stunning artistic imagination in the service of an evolving aniconic religious

perspective. I have no doubt that beautiful yarns were available in the Ancient Near East, along with fine woods and jewels. To imagine the finest materials available being devoted to the adornment of the Tent of Meeting, seems to me a religious act as well as a mark of status given the buildings of Israel's neighbors. Kings may need palaces but the God of Israel is ok with a beautifully appointed tent in the wilderness that is carried by the people as they travel towards the land God has designated for them. I can't help wondering about the ways in which this artistic imagination that expresses itself throughout the last third of Shemot may have expressed itself in the material life of Ancient Israel. We'll never know!

In Abraham Joshua Heschel's classic work, "The Sabbath", he describes Shabbat as "a palace in time". What the ancient Israelites created – that palace in time and many, many other Jewish palaces in time – persist all these millennia later. As for those ancient neighbors I, inexplicably again, remembered - this time - a Shelley poem about a long dead king who is memorialized on a pedestal seen by a traveler. The text seems appropriate here: "My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings/ Look on my Works, ye Mighty and despair! Nothing beside remains. Round the decay/Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare/The lone and level sands stretch far away." The works of Judaism, though, persist!

Dvar Torah for Zoom Havdalah February 20, 2021

The pasuk in the entire Torah most beloved of fund raisers is from parshah Terumah, which we just read:

Exodus 25:2- "Tell the Israelite people to bring Me gifts; you shall accept gifts for Me from every person whose heart so moves them." These gifts are for construction of the Mishkan and ever since, it seems, the Jewish community has been fated to always be in need of funds for construction. In Terumah we receive very detailed instructions for the building of the Mishkan but what instructions do we receive for building the community which needs the construction?

There are very few lines in Terumah which don't have to do with materials and construction. I just quoted one of them. The other is Exodus 25:8- "And let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among [or 'in'] them." God is explicitly saying God's spirit would not dwell in "it," the sanctuary, but in the people. People are the only suitable home for God's presence.

I find it appealing that the containers for the parchments with Torah of tefillin are called batim, the plural of bayit, which means box but, more particularly, home. In the beginning of the pandemic I reviled these Zoom boxes in which we found ourselves instead of in each other's presence. I have since come to appreciate how these boxes have allowed us pieces of parchment to continue to have a home and remain a community away from the 5th floor. And this home was built in the same way as brick-and-mortar structures, with people giving of their time and effort to build a site and ensure content. And all of us here have followed our hearts to give our presence with a 'c' to our new home. We are here not to raise money but to raise our spirits, so that God and a sense of community may continue to dwell among us.

Parshat T'rumah
Lee Adlerstein

Parshat t'rumah talks to us in a fundamental way by setting out timeless Jewish qualities in practical terms — first on who we are supposed to be — our personality, presentation and self-image; and second in laying out what our primary job is.

T'rumah reinforces the idea that we are a people of dignity and self-pride in our deportment. One would think that having been suddenly liberated from three hundred years of slavery the Israelite scene would be essentially ramshackle, in a condition something like what was displayed by the Amorite tribe depicted in the 9th Chapter of the book of Joshua — with their dry bread crumbs, warped wine-skins, worn out shoes and clothing. Quite the contrary, the Israelites are here able to gather and shape on the spot a Mishkan with beautiful dimensions, tapestries, gold and other exalted attributes. We have proportioned courtyards, a beautiful Aron Kodesh — the beginnings of Jerusalem architecture after all.

The ability of the Israelites to perform the great mitzvah of the Mishkan was not achieved by accident. Parshat Bo has told us that after the plague of the first born, the Egyptians were so anxious to have the Israelites depart, that they gave out a form of severance pay, replete with gold. These riches must have been well-used in constructing the mishkan. The family tradition is filled with biblical fore-bearers who were able to adjust and innovate. It is in the nature of the Israelites for our encampment to be noble — ma Tovu ohalecha yaakov umishkanosecha Yisrael.

In this vein, the prescriptions of T'rumah carry with them the personality characteristics coming from fulfillment of expectations that have sustained the Jews — at least on an aspirational level — during the many generations: sufficient enterprise and energy to be prepared for the doing of mitzvot through study, discipline and adherence to intricate direction; appreciation of beauty without sacrificing essential simplicity; regard for substance without undue emphasis on physical permanence (no gates of babylon, no pyramids); serious presentation holding at bay ostentation; a bond of community without celebrating individual display. Do we not know people in our lives — however imperfect — who carry these qualities enveloped in our parsha? Am I wrong?

It is t'rumah which visibly sets out for the first time how we actually apply ourselves to the doing of our fundamental practical work — embracing the rule of law every day in service to hashem. What is achieved here is first tangible proof that the Jewish people hopefully with help will not allow the pain of past repression to blot out the present or soak up the future. Until now the Israelites have been actors and objects in history with all its turns, glories and tragedies — but still a people without a prescribed day to day job. Here, finally, we get into action.

Shabbat shalom.

# Tetzaveh 5763 (2/15/03)

by William Meyers, *delivered at Minyan M'at*

A month or so ago during Minyan announcements, Carolyn Greene stood up and talked about this journal, Kerem. It is devoted, it says on the title page, to Creative Explorations in Judaism, and it is edited by friends of hers. Carolyn was distributing copies of this issue to help them. I asked Beverly Schneider, who was sitting near me, to let me flip through the copy of Kerem she was holding, and I was immediately taken with an article that touched a special concern of mine, the relationship of Jews and photography.

The article is entitled "Ervah: Hidden Sensuality," a photoessay by Na'ama Batya Lewin. Ms Lewin is an Orthodox woman. In the essay she explores women's head coverings in the Orthodox community by taking portraits of herself in various Orthodox neighborhoods while wearing the head covering appropriate to that particular neighborhood. So in some cases she wears a sheitel, that is a wig, in some a hat, in some a kerchief, etc. Let me show you a few of these.

I am not interested here in discussing the quality of these pictures as art, that is whether they are good pictures or not, I am interested in them as cultural artifacts, ones that illustrate a new movement in photography. There is nothing unusual about photographers taking self-portraits; the current exhibit at ICP includes self-portraits by William Henry Fox Talbot taken in the mid-nineteenth century, the very beginning of photography. And there is nothing unusual about a photographer dressing up to take self-portraits. Over the past few decades Cindy Sherman has made an enormous reputation for herself as an avant-garde artist by taking pictures of herself outfitted in various disguises. But Sherman, who like Lewin is Jewish, says the theme of her work is the exploration of the self. It is a narcissistic, and increasingly depressing, exploration that I believe can be differentiated from the work in this issue of Kerem.

Now there is a long roster of truly distinguished Jewish women photographers, and although it is still somewhat unusual for an Orthodox woman to be a professional art photographer at all, the fact that Lewin is one is only sociology. What is significant here is that Na'ama Lewin is using her camera, her art, to explore aspects of Judaism. Her essay quotes Talmud and Maimonides. If she juxtaposes those texts with her photographs, she must mean for them to comment on each other. That sort of give and take is what we would expect from any Jew concerned with the tradition, but it is not something that has much been done by photographers.

Max Kozloff is a well-known writer on photography, a teacher, curator, and himself a photographer. In a recent article in Parnassus about the role of photography in the aftermath of September 11, he said, "By and large, photography operates as a secular medium,.." That is true. There was a mini vogue 100 or so years ago for shooting tableaux vivantes of Biblical scenes by Christian photographers, but they mostly have a tacky, even camp, look about them. The medium does not seem to lend itself to religious expression the way music or poetry do, maybe because music seems so apt for dealing with the ineffable, and poetry for discussing abstractions and elevated thoughts.

The other plastic arts – painting and sculpture – are more capable of handling religious themes, as even a brief visit to the Renaissance section of any creditable museum will show. The painter and sculptor are not as bound to the physical realities of their models as the photographer is, so ordinary humans can be

idealized into saints, gold-leaf halos can be placed around their heads, and suggestive light qualities added to give a supernatural aura to the overall scene. In spite of which, over the last few decades, an increasing number of Jewish photographers are using their Judaism – the religious, spiritual aspects of Judaism – as an inspiration for their work.

Let me make clear what I mean. There is an exhibit up now at the Museum of the City of New York by Steve Hoffman entitled An Intimate Portrait of the Chabad-Lubavitch of Brooklyn. This is competent work but, although the subject is a religious community, the approach is ethnographic. Hoffman shows us what the people in this community look like as they go about their daily tasks, including their ritual observances. It is not unlike a National Geographic article on a tribe in Africa or the Amazon rainforest. This is not what I have in mind when I talk about the new Jewish photography.

If you go to www.toddweinstein.com you can view this photographer's essay The 36 Unknown. While documenting the WW II death camps, Weinstein felt he had to express something beside the bestiality of the Nazis. He began to notice and photograph what might be faces or other vestiges of absent human beings in the inanimate objects he saw through his viewfinder; in rocks, in twisted metal, in items encountered on the street. He conceptualized these as being the 36 totally righteous men, the Lamed-Vavniks, that Jewish tradition maintains sustain the world. Without passing on the quality of this work as art, what is new about it is the photographer's recourse to his religious roots in an attempt to overcome the nihilism of his original subject matter. And it is this impulse that connects this drash with today's parsha, Tetzaveh.

Actually with three parshiot, last week's Terumah, which dealt with the building of the Miskhan, Tetzaveh, which deals with the furnishings of the Mishkan, and next week's Ki Thissa, which details the indiscretion of the golden calf. They are a trilogy of related material, and you may recall Michael Rebell telling us last week of the midrashim that claim the incident of the calf actually took place before instructions for the Mishkan were given, although that is not the order they appear in in the Chumash. Everett Fox says in a gloss on this part of his translation of Exodus that, "The entire section is an object lesson in what the Bible deems it proper for human beings to make, .." He points out the repetition of the key word 'asoh, "make." So it is not surprising that these parshiot figure in Jewish artworks – for instance, the pomegranate from the fringe of the high priest's robe that Deborah translated into stained glass for us – and that they also figure in discussions of Jewish aesthetics.

Neil Folberg cited the Miskan in a lecture he gave at Temple Emmanuel a few years ago about the pictures in his book And I Shall Dwell Among Them. You may recall the Minyan gave a copy of this book to Herman Sands in appreciation for his work as architect designing this space. Folberg grew up in San Francisco, studied photography with Ansel Adams, became a baal tshuvah, and made aliyah to Israel. With his yalmulke, beard, and talit koton, he is immediately identifiable as an observant Jew. He has tried to develop an aesthetic to guide his photography based on traditional Jewish sources – Torah, midrashim, the Marharal of Prague – and incorporate it with what he's learned from his teacher Ansel Adams and other photographers he admires, as well as all he values in the other canons of art.

Folberg asked in his lecture, "How can any material object contain something that is spiritual? It would seem that matter and spirituality are diametric opposites, and can have no relationship with one another. That is, indeed, the view of certain religions – but most certainly not Judaism. Moses is commanded to build the sanctuary in the Sinai dessert with the following commandment:

"'Make for me a Sanctuary, and I shall dwell among them…' Exodus 25:8-9

"Moses wonders how the Divine Presence can be contained within the parameters of anything physical – and in reply he is told it can be done.

"The midrash elaborates: "At the time when G-d said to Moses, 'Make for Me a Sanctuary . . .' Moses wondered: 'the glory of G-d fills the Heavens and the Earth. How, then, can He reasonably say, 'Make for Me a Sanctuary...?'

"The Holy One, Blessed Be He, replies: 'Moses, it's not like you think; just takes these twenty planks of wood!...' (Midrash Shmot Rabba, Seder Terumah 34)"

It should be clear from this quote that Folberg is seriously engaged with the sources. My guess is he considers each of his photographs, the good ones anyway, to be like one of the twenty planks of wood. That is, the picture is a potential dwelling place for the Divine. This is certainly an appropriate concept for his book of synagogues. The photographs have a luminous quality to them, a richness, and although very few people are seen in the pictures, the presence of their congregations is palpable even in those shuls which haven't had a minyan in decades.

Neil Folberg's next book was In a Desert Land: Photographs of Israel, Egypt and Jordan. His debt to Ansel Adams is clear in these pictures of the Sinai, the Negev, the Judean desert, and the other sites that are the backdrop of Biblical history. And there is a striving for a spiritual quality that is frequently realized. But they raise a question that will be asked a lot if this new willingness of Jewish photographs to be influenced by their religion is more than a passing phenomenon: granted the pictures in In a Desert Land have spiritual qualities, how do we know they are the Jewish spiritual qualities? That is, would a pantheist, a pagan, a frum idol worshipper, have shown these mountains and deserts and wadis any differently? You can see where this is going. With the limited means of differentiation available to the photographer, how does the Jew manifest his special intentions?

There is another problem in this movement besides the difficulty of Jewish photographers adopting appropriate idioms. What if the photographer is wrong in his understanding of Judaism? Many of you have probably seen the advertisements for Shekhina, the book and exhibit by Leonard Nimoy. There are naked ladies in tallitot and tephillin looking very soulful, but also somewhat silly. Nimoy grew up in an Orthodox environment, and claims to have been influenced in his work by the Kabbalah – a subject about which I claim no special knowledge. Nonetheless, his pictures seem to me to owe much more to a wistful, adolescent New Age spiritualism than to the insights of the Lurianic sages of Tsfat. So you can see where this is going: who gets to determine the aesthetic halacha, to say this is kosher and this is tref?

So, good, there will be plenty more for Jews to argue about.

Another reason for associating the three pashiot with artistic creation is their position in the Chumash. They are set between the portions that deal with the giving of laws, that is the establishment of acceptable norms of behavior. And the giving of these laws is set in the middle of the book that deals with the risks that must be taken to achieve freedom. The connection of these themes would seem to run like this: to be creative, to make, one needs the discipline imposed by accepting God's commandments, and this acceptance is predicated on freeing one self of the pathologies of Mitzraim. The difficulties in reaching a successful outcome to this project, that is of freedom, discipline and creativity, become apparent with the enthusiastic, somewhat mad, dancing of the Israelites around the golden calf. Their surrender to the excitement of

idolatry so soon after their encounter with Divinity at Sinai, is a comment of how hard it is to achieve the steadfastness needed to make a sanctuary, a Mishkan, but also on how necessary its making is.

Aviva Zornberg has an elaborate and difficult explication of the meanings of the three related pashiot in her book The Particulars of Rapture Reflections on Exodus. She also cites the midrashim that discuss the incident of the golden calf as happening before the instructions for the building of the Mishkan, of the intricate relationship between the various acts of creation. She suggests that, "At their heart...is a sustained concern with time and memory, a fascination with both the timeless moment of full presence and the subtle gifts of temporality and process." Her expression "the timeless moment of full presence" sums up wonderfully what it is photographers hope they are capturing when they press the shutter release on their camera. Those photographers who think their Jewish inheritance can help them to do that have much to learn from the study of Terumah, Tetzaveh, and Ki Thissa.

As a coda to this drosh I want to tell an anecdote. I ran across Neil Folberg in a photo gallery in Chelsea one day after I had started work on an article I wrote on the same subject of Jews and photography. I told him I intended to quote him about the mishkan to illustrate the way Jewish learning could influence a photographer's work.

He gave a deprecating shrug and said, "I don't know that it's that important."

"The thing I mean about Judaism," I said, "is, it's a matter of whether you're on the outside looking in, or on the inside of looking out."

Folberg smiled. "That's good," he said. "That's good."

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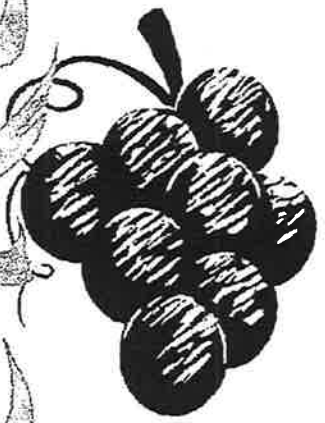
# KEREM

*Creative Explorations*

*in Judaism*



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Who passed it down to us.
Let us not be the break in that chain of tradition.
Abraham had Isaac to re-dig his wells so that the water continued to flow.
Rebecca drew water from the well of loving-kindness so that she could join with Isaac.
Together they used these waters to water the seed that would become Israel.

May we be blessed with children
So that we may draw from these same waters
And give them to these children
So that they may drink deeply from the traditions
And grow into strong shoots from the branches of Israel,
Your treasured people in whose praise You dwell.

*Barukh atah Adonai, eloheinu melekh ha-olam, moshivi akeret ha-bayit, em ha-banim smeichah.*
Blessed are You, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who transforms a barren woman into a happy mother of children.



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# Ervah: Hidden Sensuality

*Photoessay by Na'ama Batya Lewin*

Religiously observant women in today's American Orthodox Jewish society can be classified by how they cover their hair. Each community follows its own "correct" style for *kisui rosh* (covering the head). Some cover all their hair. Others reveal natural hair. Some wear custom-made *sheitels* (wigs) of natural hair or synthetic sheitels. Some cover their heads with a hat, a turban, a snood, a kerchief, or even a "shpitzel." And others wear synthetic sheitels topped with a hat.

As an Orthodox woman and a New York based photographer and artist, I tried to "blend in" with various local Orthodox communities. Would I



be accepted if I dressed like the community's women? Would they befriend me even if I was a total stranger except for my dress and my hair-covering? In the winter and spring of 2001, I visited the Brooklyn communities in Williamsburg, Boro Park, Crown Heights, and Flatbush. In Manhattan, I spent time at the Upper and Lower East Side, as well as on the Upper West Side. I shopped in Cedarhurst and Monsey. I tried to dress like the women of the neighborhood, and I photographed myself in their surroundings.

Hair-covering displays a woman's dedication to her Judaism and identifies her affiliation. It is ironic that a practice which is designed to preserve modesty is, in today's society, the most public display of religious observance and identification. As I was growing up I discovered that what I wore was viewed as a measure of my religious observance. How long was my skirt? Did I wear pants? Was the top button of my blouse closed? How I dressed would affect the match—the *shiddukh*—that would influence my adult life.

***ervah*** **(n.) Hebrew—nakedness, lewdness, shame, unchastity.**

I was surprised to learn, after I was married, that my style of dress continued to classify me, maybe even more than before. I chose to wear a hat, and I chose to display some natural hair. This marked me. I was not Lubavitch or Satmar. Nor was I a "yeshivish" woman from Boro Park or Flatbush. I looked too modern with brown curls hanging to my shoulders. Distinctive hair-covering not only identifies women in the Orthodox Jewish community, but divides them. "One of us" is readily distinguished from an "outsider" by how a woman covers her hair. "If she covers her hair differently than I do, she does not practice my style of Judaism." In its own way, the religious community puts as much emphasis on how a woman looks as does today's secular community.



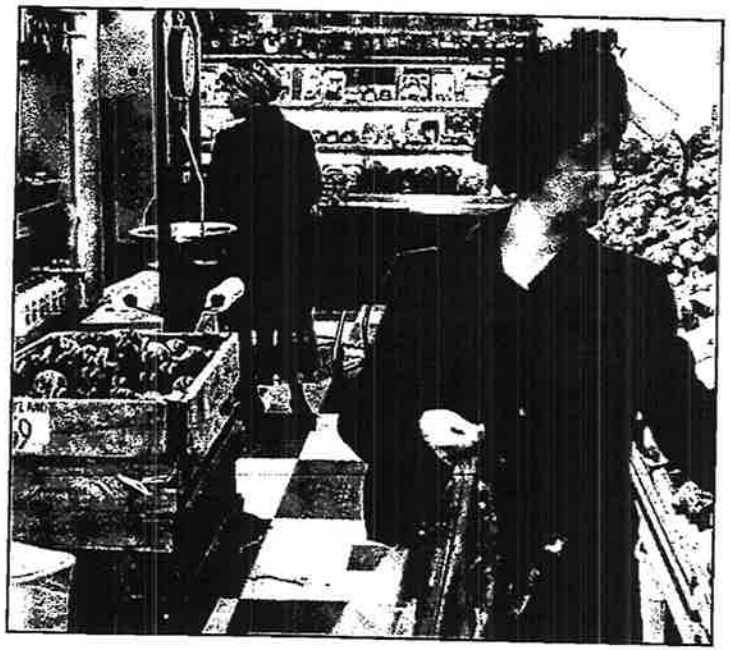


**The hair of a woman is considered ervah.**

*—Talmud Berachot, 24a*

There are those women who cover most of their own hair with a hat or *tichal* and expose less than a *tefach* [approximately 74mm]. As a sub-category of this group are those who expose more than a *tefach* relying upon the opinion that hair which extends beyond the hairline is not subject to any prohibitions.

—*Rabbi Mayer Schiller, "The Obligation of Married Women To Cover Their Hair,"* The Journal of Halacha and Contemporary Society, *vol. 30 (1995), pp.103-104.*










There are others who, while wearing a wig, cover most of it with a hat or other covering of some sort. This appears to be an attempt to combine the opinion of those authorities who permit a small amount of hair to be uncovered with those who permit wigs. In other words, if the wig be prohibited, at least the majority of it is covered; and if the wig be permitted then there is certainly no problem.

—*Rabbi Mayer Schiller, "The Obligation of Married Women To Cover Their Hair,"* The Journal of Halacha and Contemporary Society, *vol. 30 (1995), pp.103.*





**A man is forbidden to gaze at a woman with intent to enjoy her beauty.**

*—Maimonides, Hilchot Issurei Biah 21:2*



Benyamin Cirlin – Parshat Tetzaveh 2011

Good shabbes.

The verse that most speaks to me this week's Parasha is:
" I shall dwell among the Children of Israel, and I shall be their God." This of course echoes the verse we read last week in Parashat Trumah,
"They shall make a Sanctuary for me, so that I may dwell among them." This is one of those big picture verses that under girds everything we do, that helps us make sense of all the little details of our religious lives. God in this verse wants to be here among us. Shachanti, I will dwell, is from the root SCN, the base of the word schoonah, neighborhood, and shachane, neighbor. Long before Mister Rogers came along, God has been sweetly singing to us "Won't You be My Neighbor." Being a Jew is about living in God's neighborhood, and perhaps one way of seeing our weekly Shabbas get together here is as a holy block party, a coming together in which we collectively let our hair down and sing, and learn, and schmooze and eat and drink. And oh yes, there is one other thing we do: we pray together, attempting to focus on that God who so to speak brought us out to the sacred streets. But like any block party, sometimes you can enjoy yourself without even paying any mind to the organizer, to the host. If the main goal is being with your friends, seeing the sights and catching up on the latest news, all very worthy goals, mind you, perhaps spending two hours with the language and theology of the Siddur is a kind of necessary nuisance, like the crowds one puts up with while enjoying the sights and sounds of a favorite street fair.

A scene from my childhood: I am 11 years old and sitting next to my father at Rosh Hashanah davenning at our Conservative Shul in North Hollywood, California. I lean over to my dad and ask him, "Why does it say the same thing on every page – wouldn't once or twice be enough?" He shrugged his shoulders and smiled at me.

In 1972 at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem I studied Jewish philosophy with David Hartmann, and he played a crucial role in helping me think about what it means to be a Jew. Living and exploring Jewish life and identity had been on my personal front burner for about two years, and I was searching for a useable

religious vocabulary to express a deepening sense of Divine presence and mystery in my life. Davennning in shul slowly became part of my weekly rhythm in Yerushalyim that year, yet it was not always a smooth process, and I often struggled with the words and meaning of our liturgy. And so I approached Hartman once during office hours and asked: "How do I pray?" Of course he had no simple solution to this conundrum, but his answer has in many ways sustained me until this day: "When in doubt, listen to the voices, hopes and dreams of your people."

As useful as that advice was, it wasn't enough. I needed a spiritual diet with more protein – I needed to find my own voice. So in my early twenties, I was excited when I came across Shimshon Raphael Hirsch's explanation that the root of the Hebrew word tfillah, PLL, means to judge, to differentiate, to clarify, to decide. It implies the process of sorting out evidence from rumor. So the tefillah experience is meant to be one of self judgment, clarifying what is really important. This certainly seemed like a worthy goal to engage in on a daily or weekly basis. But how was I to get there using this tool of ours, the siddur? Still I was left with pages and pages of words that I experientially found myself saying without much feeling and aware of a disconnect between the purpose and practice of davenning.

Sometime later in my twenties I discovered Heschel's "Man in Quest of God", and it soon became my favorite book of his. How could I not endorse the following?

"Prayer is meaningless unless it is subversive, unless it seeks to overthrow and to ruin the pyramids of callousness, hatred, opportunism, falsehoods. The liturgical movement must become a revolutionary movement seeking to overthrow the forces that continue to destroy the promise, the hope, the vision..." Furthermore he states, "We do not refuse to pray; we abstain from it. We ring the hollow bell of selfishness rather than absorb the stillness that surrounds the world, hovering over all the restlessness and fear of life – the secret stillness that precedes our birth and succeeds our death. Futile self indulgence brings us out of tune with the gentle song of nature's waiting, of mankind's striving for salvation."

His words moved me deeply, and brought forth an intuitive, "yes, that's it." But once again, I faced the same dilemma: how does the siddur as a tool help me to deeply reach beyond my own selfish complacency and move me into a world of radical wonder?

A few years later I discovered Rav Soloveitchik, and his emphasis on approaching prayer as a response to our existential situation of living in a broken world also convincingly spoke to me:

He writes: "If man does not find himself in narrow straits, if he is not troubled by anything, if he knows not what tzara is, then he need not pray. To a happy man, to contented man, the secret of prayer was not revealed. God needs neither thanks nor hymns. He wants to hear the outcry of man, confronted with a ruthless reality. He expects prayer to rise from a suffering world cognizant of its genuine needs. In short, through prayer man finds himself. Prayer enlightens man about his needs."

So, in theory, davenning is an amazing invention of our sages - an opportunity for self judgment, an opportunity for contact with revolutionary fervor and radical wonder, and an opportunity for deep articulation of needs generated in response to the painful aspects of our ultimate existential reality. What thinking person could ask for anything more?

But let me ask you: how many of you here today have experienced your own Shacharit davenning as a profound experience of self discovery? How many of you truthfully feel that you will leave here today as a changed human being as a result of your spiritual undertakings this morning? Now clearly, one davenning experience does not generate a new human being. But have you experienced intimations of the better person you can be – have you contacted a vision of who you want to become as a result of your sojourn this morning in the Siddur? I hope so, but if your life is anything like mine, then there are probably innumerable times when this does not occur.

I understand that there are very few experiences in life and relationships that consistently reach optimal expectations, and certainly there is an ebb and flow to the davenning experience. And ultimately, I am of the Woody Allen school of

Chasidism that values "showing up" in shul above all, regardless of whether anything else happens.

But I am not yet ready to give up on making the recitation of our liturgy a meaningful experience. I do recognize that we in our Minyan have many emotionally powerful moments when we sing together. But is this because of the meaning of the liturgy or in spite of it? Is it possible to find a way to have these texts speak to us while acknowledging doubts and questions about a God who listens and commands, about a God who might be out there, in here, or perhaps no where or everywhere?

Several months ago the following thought occurred to me at morning minyan while reciting Ahavah Rabbah, the prayer immediately before the Shma. Here is a prayer that is a treasure trove of emotion and yearning – yet on good days, we run through it in thirty seconds. "Too fast, too fast" I heard myself thinking. This is a moment of deep spiritual foreplay, setting us up for intimate connection as we move towards proclaiming the oneness of God in the Shma and then move to what is meant to be a climactic face to face encounter with the Amidah, and yet we zip through its recitation.

It occurred to me that morning that we have lost the instructions to what our friend Irwin calls the "sacred technology" we have in our hands. A computer is a beautiful thing, but if you don't know how to turn on the CPU, you have nothing. How do we turn on the siddur? We have lost the instructions to this tool that our people have used for so many generations. Maybe we have to recover or rewrite the instructions to the Siddur in order make it more user friendly - and by that I mean, as a source of personal growth and development. Maybe there is a way to occasionally transform it from something we strive to get through into something that helps lift us up to a higher place, or are we simply forced to leave the really important work of our lives to late night conversations over the kitchen table or to our therapist's offices?

Listen to Rabbi Harold Shulweis in an article titled "Is Prayer Magic?"

"In prayer you pray to move God. But the way you move God is through moving the divine in yourself. If you divide God from the image of the divinity within you, if you separate the two, then you speak about moving God without it affecting you at all. You ask can I move God without asking whether you can move yourself. You ask "does God listen to prayer?" instead of asking "am I listening to my prayer?" All your questions are directed toward somebody totally other than yourself. But the purpose of prayer is to activate the godly in and between ourselves."

In this vein, and after close to forty years of engaging with Jewish prayer, I would like to share with you the davenning instructions I have recovered. Here are my Tefillah Windows, version 5771. Perhaps they will work for you as well.

Step 1 - I must fully charge my sense of metaphor and my associative thinking abilities, and remember that the liturgical text in front of me is a kind of poetry. Literalism is to be shunned.
Step 2 - I must check that my network connections are functioning , and come into contact with the fact that I am part of a long historical chain of Jews, going all the way back to Avraham Avinu, who have strived to make meaning out of human and Jewish existence.
Step 3 - I must unplug any cords of theological constraint, and realize, both paradoxically and even somewhat humorously, that the hour of davenning is probably the wrong time to ponder questions about belief in God, revelation, and prayer. These questions are a distraction from the work at hand.
Step 5 – I must be fully aware that the liturgical text in front of me is talking about my life, and the life of my friends and community, in this very moment.
Step 6 - My job during davenning is to uncover the question being addressed to me today in every Tefilah, to hear the "eyecha", "where are you, that echoes throughout the siddur.
Step 7 – I must listen to the answer, for within that response, lies the road to self judgment, eradication of self complacency, radical wonder and awareness of my present existential needs.

Step 8 – I must consider the actions I potentially need to take in the current moment in order to grow as a Jew and as a human being.
Step 9 – And finally, I need to find time within the davenning to forget the questions, to enjoy the singing, and in the words of the Shunemite woman, to the enjoy the fact that that "betoch ami ani yoshev," which loosely translated means, how great it is to hang in the hood with my gang.

To show you how this might work in practice, let me share with you an example what I am talking about with the Tefillah "Ahavah Rabah.
The first sentence of the Tefillah reads:

Deep is Your ***Love*** for Us, Adonai Our God, boundless your tender ***compassion.***

Generally we understand this as a grand declaration and expression of the Divine nature, a declaration by the way that many here might actually have a hard time making in full honesty. Whether or not we endorse the literal meaning of that statement, we might alternatively ask as we daven the words Ahavah Rabbah, deep love:

- Whose love animates my life?
- Whose love am I seeking?
- Whose love am I pushing away?
- Who needs to hear about my love for them, and from whom do I need to hear about their love for me?

And when we daven the words, , boundless Your tender compassion, we might consider asking ourselves:

- How has compassion come into my life of late? How have I honored or acknowledge that experience?
- Who in my life needs my compassion?

- How am I not being compassionate enough towards myself, my life, and my struggles?

And when we daven

Because we have trusted in Your great and awesome holy Name...

I might ask:

- Where am I lacking trust in myself?
- Whose trust am I seeking?
- What part of myself do I not trust?
- Whose trust am I pushing away?
- Whose trust do I depend upon?

And when we state,

For you effect salvation, O God, and You have chosen us....

- Do I fully believe in my own ability to bringto make significant changes in myself, my family, my community?
- What do I need to do in order to lessen my own doubts or despair about the possibility of making real changes in self, family, community?
- Are there choices in my life today that I am failing to make?

On this sheet that I am passing out, you will find on one side more questions that occur to me from Ahavah Rabbah, and also, some questions that arise for me from the Musaph davenning. By no means do these questions exhaust the possibilities, but I think they will give you a feel for what I am talking about and I encourage you to seek out your questions. Consider these questions as an a la carte menu from you which you select as per your desire.

The Ohr Yechezkel was the masgiach of the Mir and Ponovizh yeshivas in Israel after fleeing the Nazis. He wrote the following:

The essence of prayer is to transform a person, elevating him to previously unrealized heights. Prayer is not merely the recitation of certain words; rather its goal is to change a person, and to enable him to grow from one level to the next.

May our weekly block party help us go higher and higher. Good Shabbes.

# Davenning Ahavah Rabah: Finding the Unwritten Questions

Benyamin Cirlin, Parashat Tetzaveh, 2011

With abundant **love** you have loved us, Hashem, Our God

- Whose love animates my life?
- Whose love am I seeking?
- Whose love am I pushing away?

With great **compassion** You have been compassionate with us....

- Whose compassion am I seeking?
- How has compassion come my way of late, and have I acknowledged that?
- Who in my life needs my compassion?
- How am I not being compassionate enough towards myself, my life, and my struggles?

Instill in our **hearts to understand and elucidate, to listen, learn, teach**, safeguard, perform and fulfill all the words of Your Torah's teaching with love....

- What do I understand in my heart but not my head? What do I understand in my head but not my heart?
- What do I need to learn at this point in my life?
- Is there any knowledge I already possess that I am avoiding, and what is the cost of this avoidance?
- Am I fully teaching to others all that I have to offer?

Enlighten our eyes in Your Torah, **attach our hearts to Your commandments**, and unify our hearts to love and fear your name...

- Which part of my Jewish life brings satisfaction and meaning?
- Which part of my Jewish life needs more heart and emotion? What is getting in the way of that investment?
- Which part of my Jewish life do I want to change or forego?

Because we have **trusted** in Your great and awesome holy Name...

- Where am I lacking trust in myself?
- Whose trust am I seeking?
- Whose trust am I pushing away?
- Whose trust do I depend upon?
- I trust this about myself _____ and therefore _____....

Bring us in peacefulness from the four corners of the earth and lead us with upright pride to our **land...**

- What is the state of my relationship to Israel today?
- What is the state of my commitment to Jewish people and Jewish life?

For you effect **salvation**, O God, and You have chosen us....

- Do I fully believe in my own ability to make significant changes in myself, my family, my community?
- What do I need to do in order to lessen my own doubts about the possibility of making real changes in self, family, community?

- Are there choices in my life today that I am failing to make?

Blessed are you, Hashem, who chooses His people Israel with **love**.

- Who in my life needs to hear about my love?
- From whom do I need to hear about their love for me?
- What kind of support do I need to make looming choices in my life?

Davenning the (Musaf) Amidah

Praised are You, Adonai, God of **Abraham**.....You remember the pious deeds of our **ancestors.**

- Who in my life needs my kindness, my emotional hospitality?
- Who am I shutting out of my life?
- Connecting with the memory/presence/teaching of which person in my past or present life would enrich me in the present moment?

You are the Sovereign who helps and guards, saves and **shields..**

- Where am I most vulnerable right now? What part of me needs defending?
- Does anyone in my life need me to be more protective?
- With whom and with what situation am I being overly defensive?

- What am I losing by keeping my guard up?

Your love sustains the living. Your great mercies give life to the **dead**...

- What part of my inner life, my relationships, or my work is feeling dead?
- What steps do I need to take to revive my life? What if any key action/change strategy am I avoiding?

You established he Sabbath, and found favor in its **sacrifices...**

- Which sacrifices in my present life help me to create meaning? Which sacrifices in my life are leading to resentment?
- Is there a sacrifice in my life that I am enacting and which is no longer necessary, and what is my investment in maintaining it?

We **thank** You and praise you for our lives...for your **wonders and gifts**...

- Who am I not thanking in my life? What is the block to the expression of this gratitude?
- Whose gratitude am I seeking?
- What part of my life am I not paying enough attention to in the present moment?

Praised are you Adonai, who blesses his people Israel with **peace.**

- Towards whom in my life am I holding a grudge or resentment?
- What do I lose or gain by not expressing it?
- The part of me that leaves me feeling least peaceful is _____. What do I need to do in order to change this situation?

Dvar Torah-Tetzaveh (Hamlet)-February 20, 2016

Parsha Tetzaveh is the only parsha in the Torah, outside of Bereshit, in which Moshe does not speak nor is his name mentioned. Therefore, it should not surprise us that unspoken mysteries are contained in this parsha which superficially appears to bear exclusively on the priestly vestments of Aaron and his sons and the ritual of their consecration. Indeed, the very final statement of the parsha abruptly addresses the exception to be made for the annual purification of the altar with the sin offering, thereby indirectly referring to Yom Kippur. I believe this logically and ineluctably compels us to consider the centrality of Yom Kippur in *Hamlet*...or, at any rate, that is what I plan to do and "Though this be madness, yet there is method in't." (2,2,203)

In order to demonstrate that *Hamlet* is built around Yom Kippur, we have to first consider the question of the authorship of Shakespeare's plays since no fewer than 86 people have been proposed as the "real" Shakespeare. Why so? Because there are those who cannot accept that genius appears when and where it will even in someone who did not attend Oxford or Cambridge. Ben Jonson, Shakespeare's contemporary, admitted Shakespeare"... had small Latin and less Greek" but nevertheless recognized "He was not for an age, but for all time." Emilia Bassano Lanier, a converted Sephardic Jewess, was the first British woman to present herself as a professional poet and has been proposed by some as the Dark Lady of Shakespeare's sonnets and John Hudson has claimed she was actually the author of Shakespeare's works. I believe our inquiry into the structuring of *Hamlet* around Yom Kippur will lend as much credence to this idea as it will to my main thesis.

This play is conventionally thought of as a tragedy based on Hamlet's inability to overcome his indecisiveness and revenge his father's death at the hands of the father's brother, Claudius. Actually, the play is set up as a symmetrically structured moral tale with the king of Denmark, Hamlet's father also named Hamlet, burdened with sins, having been murdered by his brother Claudius who then inherits his kingdom while Prince Hamlet dithers about morality in parallel with the king of Norway, named Fortinbras, who died at the hands of King Hamlet so that his brother, always called Norway, legitimately inherits his throne while Prince Fortinbras, is a man of action who has already engaged in an act to teshuvah. That is, at some previous time young Fortinbras had considered a military attempt on the kingdom of Denmark but, as recounted by the emissary Voltemand, his uncle "...sends out arrests
On Fortinbras, which he, in brief, obeys,
Receives rebuke from Norway, and, in fine,
Makes vow before his uncle never more
To give th' assay of arms against your Majesty." (2,2,68)

It can be argued that the rest of the play is an inquiry into whether Hamlet can understand that he is part of the problem summarized as: "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (1,4,9) Hamlet early on provides a partial enumeration of his failings with a sense of hopelessness about them:

I am myself indifferent honest,
but yet I could accuse me of such things that it
were better my mother had not borne me: I am
very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offenses
at my beck than I have thoughts to put them

in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act
them in. What should such fellows as I do crawling
between earth and heaven? (3,1,122)

Hamlet does not here include the sins yet to come: the murder of Polonius with complete indifference to his corpse as Hamlet continues to lecture his mother Gertrude on her need to repent; the responsibility for Ophelia's suicide; the engineering of the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and the killing of Claudius. Even unto his death, Hamlet ignores the declaration of his ghostly father: "Foul deeds will rise, though all the earth o'erwhelm them, to men's eyes." (1,2,257)

On one of the central practices of Yom Kippur, Hamlet may hint at fasting when he says "O, that this, too, too sullied flesh would melt, thaw and resolve itself into a dew..." (1,1,129) while his ghostly father, who died before he was able to make confession, explicitly refers to it: "I am thy father's spirit, doomed for a certain term to walk the night and for the day confined to fast in fires till the foul crimes done in my days of nature are burnt and purged away." (1,5,10)

Related to the difficulty of experiencing genuine distress at the contemplation of our failings in the Viddui and, equally, the difficulty we may find in recovering the depths of feeling for lost loved ones after years of saying Yizkor, Hamlet cries out upon seeing an actor perform as Hecuba, queen of Troy:

O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!
Is it not monstrous that this player here,
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
Could force his soul so to his own conceit
That from her working all his visage wanned,
Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect,
A broken voice, and his whole function suiting
With forms to his conceit—and all for nothing!
For Hecuba!
What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,
That he should weep for her? What would he do
Had he the motive and the cue for passion
That I have? (2,2,535)

Yet Hamlet, the university student of philosophy, while stating the two fundamental rationales for Yom Kippur, "...whose end, both at the first and now, was and is to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature." (3,2,22) and "Use every man after his desert and who shall 'scape whipping" (2,2,516) struggles to understand personal responsibility for misdeeds:

So oft it chances in particular men
That for some vicious mole of nature in them,
As in their birth (wherein they are not guilty,
Since nature cannot choose his origin),
By the o'ergrowth of some complexion
(Oft breaking down the pales and forts of reason),
Or by some habit that too much o'erleavens
The form of plausive manners—that these men,

Carrying, I say, the stamp of one defect,
Being nature's livery or fortune's star,
His virtues else, be they as pure as grace,
As infinite as man may undergo,
Shall in the general censure take corruption
From that particular fault. (1,4,23)

Hamlet chooses to see his fate as inevitable, free will as non-existent and God as responsible saying "There's a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will." (5,2,10) and

There is a
special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be
now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be
now; if it be not now, yet it will come. (5,2,204)

Of this, in Hilchot Teshuvah (5,1 and 2 and 4), Rambam wrote: "Free will is granted to all people..." and "A person should not entertain the thesis held by fools among the gentiles and the majority of the undeveloped among Israel that, at the time of a person's creation, God decrees whether he will be righteous or wicked...as imagined by many of the fools [who believe] in astrology..."

Ophelia, even when mad and distractedly offering herbs and flowers, demonstrates some understanding of teshuvah: "There's rue for you, and here's some for me; we may call it herb of grace o' Sundays. You must wear your rue with a difference." (4,5,177)

King Claudius, who is a murderer, an attempted murderer, a seducer and adulterer and a royal usurper, who is, of all the characters in the play, most fully aware of his sinfulness, speaks of his "conscience" (3,1,50) and, at the same time his inability to attain forgiveness. This character seems possessed of an extensive, if futile, knowledge of teshuvah:

O, my offense is rank, it smells to heaven;
It hath the primal eldest curse upon 't,
A brother's murder. Pray can I not,
Though inclination be as sharp as will.
My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent,
And, like a man to double business bound,
I stand in pause where I shall first begin
And both neglect. (3,3,37) and

But, O, what form of prayer
Can serve my turn? "Forgive me my foul murder"?
That cannot be, since I am still possessed
Of those effects for which I did the murder:
My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen.
May one be pardoned and retain th' offense? (3,3,51)

Rambam (HT 2,9) replies 'no': "Teshuvah and Yom Kippur only atone for sins between man and God... However, sins between man and man; for example, someone who injures a colleague, curses a

colleague, steals from him, or the like will never be forgiven until he gives his colleague what he owes him and appeases him."

Claudius continues on the nature of teshuvah and even refers to our bowed stance and our tapping at the heart during the Viddui:

What then? What rests?
Try what repentance can. What can it not?
Yet what can it, when one cannot repent?

....Bow, stubborn knees; and heart with strings of steel, be soft... (3,3,70)

But Claudius despairs of the possibility of prayer saying:

My words fly up, my thoughts remain below;
Words without thoughts never to heaven go. (3,3,97)

Anyone who has attempted to struggle with the Viddui can confirm Claudius' insights when they enter the recursive labyrinth of "al chet shechartarnoo lifarnecha b'viddui peh," that is, confessing to insincere confession which is again made insincerely. Surely anyone who has felt adrift in the long day of Yom Kippur and the seemingly endless machzor, alone with failed prayer, can identify with Hamlet's response to Polonius: "What do you read, my lord? Words, words, words." (2,2,191) This is why the white Torah mantle Minyan M'at uses for Yom Kippur is emblazoned like a battle flag with Va'ani Tefilahti Lichah..."As for me, my prayer is to You..."

Hamlet, knowing he is dying from a poisoned sword, still does not repent. Lear says "ripeness is all," but the central statement of *Hamlet* is "readiness is all." Hamlet is never ready to act or repent but only to react impulsively as his only way to overcome his excessive intellectualism, saying of himself: "...thus the native hue of resolution is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought." As Rav Soloveitchik has said: "...remorse comes as a result of emotion, not from reasoning; a person's intellect plays a negligible part in it." (On Repentance, p. 200) But Hamlet's intellectualized humanism only leaves him saying "... there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so." (2,2,245)

The play concludes with the arrival of Fortinbras, the better version of Prince Hamlet, whom the dying Hamlet had proposed as the new king and with Hamlet's devoted friend Horatio declaring the fulfillment of the ghost's assurance "Foul deeds will rise...":

... give order that these bodies
High on a stage be placed to the view,
And let me speak to th' yet unknowing world
How these things came about. So shall you hear
Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,
Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause,
And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
Fall'n on th' inventors' heads. All this can I
Truly deliver. (5,2,370)

At this point having truly delivered that *Hamlet* is about Yom Kippur and that the author was very Jewishly knowledgeable, I believe it wise to follow the best piece of advice every given a darshan, of course from our play: "Brevity is the soul of wit." (2,2,90)

Howard L. Berkowitz

Parashah Tetzave

Ben Orlove

7 March 2020 / 11 Adar 5780

This parashah has specific meaning to me, with its discussions of weaving. It is the parashah that I discussed most extensively with my older sister Haya Meyerowitz, herself a weaver and an attentive reader of the Torah.

14 years older: a half-generation apart, with only one sister midway in between. Our relationship was close, despite the distances that separated us. I had seen her only twice in the last three years, despite the urgency brought by her health issues. I had hoped to see her on a long-planned trip to Israel this May

This parashah is bittersweet for me now, the first Shabbat it has been read since she passed away on 28 Heshvan, the Tuesday before Thanksgiving. Her passing presented me with a difficult choice: to travel to Israel for the funeral and shiva, or to go as I had planned, with Judy and our children, to a house in the Catskills for the long Thanksgiving weekend. In the end, I decided to stay with my own family. That gave me a chance to speak with my children about their aunt, whom they had seen fewer times than she or I would have hoped. Thanks to Whatsapp, I could visit with her children and grandchildren throughout the shiva, and see her apartment as well, with familiar items from our parents' old home back in Brooklyn, from her different homes that I had visited.

It is appropriate to speak of her on a Shabbat, and at a time when Purim, soon approaching, brings thoughts of Pesach. Haya was the one who gave me my early experiences of Jewish ritual when I was a pre-schooler and in the lower elementary grades. In her late teens she drew close to the Jewish rituals that my parents had abandoned as they moved to adulthood. The Friday night candles and seders she brought into our home form part of my early memories, even though my parents continued them only sporadically after Haya married and moved to the Midwest when she was 21 and I was 7. She and her husband Yosef were both grad students, but she left her studies after completing her masters, allowing him to proceed to his doctorate while their family grew. When they celebrated their seventh anniversary in their late 20s, they had four children—something that sounds remarkable now, but was less unusual at that time.

I was able to see Haya's development both as a Torah commentator and as a weaver some years later, when I was a grad student in Berkeley and she was living with her husband and their children in Houston—a convenient spot for me to stop on trips between California and New York. I joined them at services at Congregation Brith Shalom at Houston. I recall a chumash and some other books, spread out on the dining room table, Haya discussing the parashah with Yosef.

It was in Houston that she discovered her interest in weaving. The sprawling Southern metropolis was initially alien to her, unlike the college towns in Midwest and upstate New York where she had

lived before, and she sought to fill a cultural gap in her life. When her youngest child left toddlerhood and the other three were in school, she began to have a little free time. An acquaintance introduced her to weaving, and she found it absorbing. She began with simple projects: shawls and lap blankets, often with broad stripes. She explored a variety of traditional techniques, an effort that connected with my studies in anthropology. One Thanksgiving vacation, I traveled to Arizona and spent a week on the Navajo reservation with an anthropologist, a friend of a friend. One day I drove in an old pick-up truck with a Navajo friend of his up into the Chuska Mountains, and collected dye plants. His friend, from a culture where women spin and weave, liked hearing that my sister was a weaver. I remember bringing the plants to Houston. A strong scent, something like sage, filled her kitchen as she prepared the dye in iron pots. The skeins dried to a rich flaxen yellow.

She progressed from smaller pieces to wall hangings, some with abstract patterns, large irregular sections with thick pile. She sold some to corporations that hung them in air-conditioned offices in that booming city. I recall talking with her around that time about whether weaving was an art or a craft: questions that resonated with many in those years when hierarchies were challenged, but that had a personal note for her. Was the space in her life large enough for her to achieve the level of art, or could she only fit a craft into her busy life, a wife and mother in a family of six?

She began weaving tallitot, finding a growing level of observance through her congregation. She completed one, likely her first, in 1970, for the bar mitzvah of her oldest son. Only in writing this dvar torah did I reflect on how unusual that undertaking was, three years before the publication of the First Jewish Catalog. There could not have been many handwoven tallitot made anywhere in America at that time.

She and her family made aliyah in 1973, following a visit to Israel that she found deeply moving. I began teaching at the University of California in Davis the next year, and some years later joined a Torah discussion group. On one visit to Israel, Haya showed her set of commentaries by Nehama Leibowitz. This was my first exposure to commentaries that I read closely rather than skimmed.

I recall speaking about Tetzave, this week's parashah. with her. We noted its account of the high priest's garments.

I clearly recall two sections that we discussed, neither of them the ethical or political issues that interested Leibowitz. They both address the robe, a blue garment under the ephod, a more elaborate garment with precious dyestuffs and gold thread.

Shmot 28: 31 And you shall make the robe for the ephod all blue. **32** And the opening for the head shall be in the middle of it, its opening shall have a wovenwork border all around, like the opening of a coat of mail it shall be, it must not tear. Haya discussed how one could incorporate such a hole into a single garment. It would be a challenge, since the warp threads run the whole length of the weaving. She persisted in working out a solution to this puzzle. She suggested double cloth as a possibility. It had two sets of warp threads, as if weaving two separate cloths on same loom, which could be attached in part at one end, leaving the required opening.

The other section describes the bottom of the robe:

Shmot 28: **33** And you shall make on its hem pomegranates of blue and purple and crimson, on its hem all around, and golden bells between them all around. 34 A golden bell and a pomegranate, a golden bell and a pomegranate all around.

Haya repeated the Hebrew description of these adornments, 'pa'amon zahav v'rimon, pa'amon zahav v'rimon.' There is a lovely cadence to these words. As I read them now, I think that they evoke the even pattern of adornments. The rhythmic words and the rhythmic ringing of the bells; this provides a topic which fascinated commentators. Hizkuni stated that the bells would ring when the pomegranates struck them, though others have proposed alternative arrangements of the two.

Haya welcomed the opportunity to consider these instructions. She was not planning to weave the high priest's robe, but she wanted to work out how it could be done. The rimonim, she said, could have been made by finishing off the ends of the warp threads. I think that she may have suggested working in additional threads with a needle. Or perhaps that detail is a fragment from another conversation of ours.

Like many immigrants, she encountered challenges in her new country. Yosef's academic career, which led him to prominent universities in the US, faced obstacles in Israel, while she became the one with the steadier income. For many years, she taught weaving at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, and ran other classes and taking on individual students as well. She volunteered as a leader of a knitting club in her Jerusalem neighborhood in Ramot.

Her weaving flourished in Israel. Once, while we were discussing her involvement in a museum exhibit of weavings by Jewish Kurds from Iraq, she explained to me how their work used local materials and were suited to the local climate. She drew on this in her own work, giving it a sense of place that was the missing from heavy hangings in Houston.

Though she did not make a priest's robe, she wove ritual cloths. Reaching out to people she left in the US and to new circles in Israel, she prepared Rosh Hashanah card, each with a small woven piece, depicting images like apples and honey, or trees. Her production of tallitot expanded, each in close consultation with client.

And she wove two parakhiyot for her Masorti Minyan, Kehilat Yaar Ramot. The first parochet, based on the third day of creation, evoked the separation of waters, with a main body of white and beige stripes of flat weave, a small blue wedge at the top and a larger bottom section of thick blue pile. The second, a woven version of the first page of mashekhet Rosh Hashanah, white on white, subtly different textures, rectangles arranged like the page, with the mishnah at the center, ringed by Rashi and other commentaries. These have remained on display and in use at her minyan.

There's another two-word phrase repeated in this chapter, not in a single verse as with the bells and pomegranates, but rather at the beginning and the end the weaving instructions, indicates a purpose.

Leibowitz includes this pasuk in her discussion of the parashah. Shmot 28 "2 And you shall make sacred garments for Aaron your brother l'kavod ol'tiferet, for glory and for splendor.

Are these two qualities properties of the garments themselves? Kavod, which can also mean weight, could refer to their materiality, tiferet, which can also mean beauty, to their appearance? Or does the kavod bring honor to the Holy One, tiferet to the People of Israel? I would have welcomed the chance to tell Haya that this verse marks the first use of the word tiferet in the Torah. I am sure she would have smiled to realize that it applied to something made by a weaver.

The next verse in chapter 28 introduces the third pair of terms, chachem for wise person and khosheyv, designer. In verse 3 God directs Moses to speak to kol-chachmei-lev, asher mileytiv ruach chachma "every wise-hearted person whom I have filled with a spirit of wisdom." These phrases immediately follow glory and splendor in verse 2, suggesting that the wisdom of the weaver are associated with these qualities of the garment. Similarly, the first mention of design appears at the end of verse 6, between a reference to particular types of thread and the specification of the sections which compose the ephod, suggesting that the weaver must be a skilled designer to receive such instructions. Would design mark the fulfillment of details, wisdom the overall qualities of the whole? Haya might have given up her concerns about the relation of art and craft, seeing that these two are not opposed, but both necessary.

And, to be filled with ruach chachma, a spirit of wisdom: ruach suggests a period of intensity. Indeed Haya's weaving was episodic. She would plan a new piece, and then settle into production, as the shuttle flew back and forth, the heddles on the loom lifted and fell. She would sometimes work long days, and far into the evening, as the time to complete a project drew near. I regret that I did not sit with her for a quiet spell while she worked at the loom. She mentioned in letters how she welcomed this steady, sometimes unreflective work, the complement to the focused inquiry of design, the painstaking setting up of the warp.

It seems to me now, a few months after her death, that the design lay in each piece she made, the wisdom in the decades-long course of her work, from a young wife and mother struggling to pry time free, to a recently arrived immigrant seeking to comprehend her new country, to a confident teacher and accomplished maker. Attentive to details of each piece, attentive to the integrity of each piece, she brought kavod and tiferet, not only to the shawls and Rosh Hashanah cards, the tallitot and parakhiyot, but also to the spaces where her weavings are exhibited, to her congregation in Jerusalem, to her many students, to the world.

She led a life whose design was as unique as her weavings: a life composed of distinct phases, as the hangings and parochet were composed of sections, each with a specific color and texture.

It is poignant that the kavod v'tiferet of her life have become fully evident only after its end, as the qualities of a weaving can be wholly seen only when it is finished and taken off the loom. It is in the Greek tradition, not ours, that the fates allot the span of a life through the length of the warp: our tradition teaches us just how much can be made upon that warp.

Parshat Tetzaveh

Growing up we were blessed to have in our family a wonderful Aunt whose world-view was typified by insisting that her birthday — February 17 — was the best calendar day anyone possibly could be born, coming exactly 5 days after Lincoln's and 5 days before Washington's. Of course, nieces and nephews accepted this logic unconditionally. The strange thing is that Congress also actually came to agree with her, setting President's day for the Monday closest to the Washington-Lincoln midpoint.

That uncomplicated patriotism from years ago would come across today as too simple. Much has happened to have us raise questions, lose confidence, tamp down enthusiasm. But there is much to be gained sometimes in remembering past echoes — and given our present circumstances, we do well here on February 12 to visit with our Rail Splitter President if only for a few moments.

In the February after being elected, and right around his birthday, Lincoln set out on his 2,000 mile multi-stop train trip from Springfield to Washington. Though marking a new administration, it was from the start a beleaguered journey. His family was leaving its normal life. Several Southern states had already seceded. They did so because Lincoln had called out the curse of slavery, consistent with Jeremiah's admonition in today's Haftorah that before building can be done — national iniquities must be dealt with.

Along the way, Lincoln tried reaching out almost desperately to preserve the national peace appearing to be slipping from hand. In Trenton [. ]. In Baltimore, needing to change trains and hearing of immediate plots against him, Lincoln altered his way of dressing — a floppy wool hat rather than a Stove Pipe, a different kind of shawl, stooping down so that his height would not be so easily recognized. The rest is history — though not strictly religious, Lincoln never faltered from following the prophetic command.

It seems that in today's second return in davening together, we too continue what has been for many a beleaguered journey. Normal life has continued to be disrupted. Relationships and cycle events have continued not being able to duplicate usual patterns. Even dressing and posture are more utilitarian, replete with masks and need to dodge an enemy.

Each of us will have our own wishes and priorities at this time of re-joining, and it is difficult to express what those would be for the Kahal as a whole. But our aspirations would almost surely include realities inspired by but also contrasting with what our Sixteenth President experienced. Like Lincoln, we would do well to summon strength for adhering to our fundamental traditions and sense of right and wrong, including what the prophets have taught us — even if doing so may be sometimes feared as dangerous. And unlike Lincoln — whose time in office was largely fraught and often sad — may we see renewal of lasting joy coming out of the beauty of Jewish life and the comforting simplicity in just being together.

**Ki Tisa** **March 17, 2006**

So, what should I talk about? Purim?

No. I'm going to talk about something we can all agree on. I think we can all agree that the verbal fabric of Torah has different textures. This isn't higher criticism, just simple observation.

There is a smooth texture, which you often find in the Torah's narrative sections. Some stories may have the character of chronicles, others of fables; but to the degree that they roll out one event after another, they're smooth.

There are patterned textures. You find these in the genealogies, with their regular cadences, or in the repetitive turns of phrase in the laws of sacrifice.

There are wavelike textures, in the Torah's songs and poems—patches of text with an irregular but insistent rise and fall.

And then, every once in a while, you come upon a place that feels torn, or scarred. There aren't many of these places in the text. I think they occur mostly when the Torah relates an outbreak of extraordinary violence—one that is so irrational in power that it seems to have ripped into the very surface of the words.

One such incident is the circumcision of Moses's son, on the way from Midian to Egypt. An exceptionally obscure passage. I don't know what is supposed to have happened that night—but the garbled, discontinuous, almost mangled sentences give me the impresssion that it must have been awful, and uncanny.

Another scarred texture: the story of Korach's revolt. Again, the disorder, the violence, seems to erupt in the language itself. It's plausible, but inadequate, to say of the Korach narrative, "This story was redacted from different sources, which didn't match

well." Maybe the text *was* stitched together—but the impression it gives, very much to the contrary, is of something that's been ripped apart.

I am leading, of course, to the mangled texture in today's parsha—the section that relates the bizarre and bloody story of the Golden Calf. The narrative here is so tortured that our greatest rabbis struggled to resolve its details. What, exactly, did Aaron do with all that gold he collected? How many times did Moses intercede for the people? What did Moses say, or mean to say, or stop himself from saying, at the point where his sentence breaks off? Over how long a period did all this happen? The text's gaps and obscurities about these questions, and more, don't read to me like editorial lapses, or scribal slips, or mysteries of archaic philology. They're more like gashes in the writing.

And why shouldn't there be gashes, in a text that includes the injunction to take a sword and "slay every man his brother, and every man his companion, and every man his neighbor"? Aren't we witnessing such slaughters in our own time? We can try to evade the force of this language—we can buffer ourselves against it with moralized readings, or locate the incident in a sacred time and space apart from our world—but the terror is still there, right on the surface:

"Slay every man his brother, and every man his companion, and every man his neighbor."

As I have studied this parsha, I have realized that I'm not alone in being disturbed by it. Even though the action rises again after this low point, even though the parsha ends not with disaster but with a renewal of the covenant and the tail end of the divine vision, the rabbis showed great anxiety about the Golden Calf. With the greatest respect for the rabbis, I will say that they tried to squirm away from the worst of this story.

Rashi, basing himself on Midrash, blames as much as possible on the "mixed multitude" that left Egypt with the Israelites. Listen, I love Rashi. And I love my children. But I don't trust it, when I hear, "*He* did it!" This is an evasion.

Ramban, working from his own sources, squirms away by a different maneuver. He probes the intentions of Aaron and the Israelites, so he can understand the incident of the Golden Calf not as a single act of idolatry, but as a process of corruption. In this way, he argues that not everyone was guilty, or guilty in the same degree. And for the people as a whole, he says, the motivation at first was regrettable, but not idolatrous.

This is the line of reasoning I want to follow. I realize that many of you know this material perfectly, but perhaps, even for you, a quick summary may be useful.

The basic argument is this: Nobody could possibly be so stupid as to think that the ring that was dangling in his ear yesterday has now become the living God who brought him up from Egypt. Since nobody is that dumb, the Golden Calf could not intially have been meant to be an idol. What was its purpose, then? To lead the people. The people did not know what had happened to Moses. They were frightened, and didn't know who would direct them. They were not looking for a substitute for Hashem—despite the plain meaning of the text—but for Moses.

In this reading, the Golden Calf was first meant, at worst, to be a kind of tool of divination. Moreover, like many statues of calves or oxen in the ancient world—I'm going outside Ramban here—it could have been conceived not as an idol in itself, but as a pedestal for an idol, or in this case a pedestal for the invisble and eternal God. Ramban—we're getting back to him now—understands the figure of the calf as representing one of the four living creatures that carry God's throne. So the statue is just

a tool for bringing the people closer to God, in the absence of the man who had brought God close to the people.

The proof: When the people see the calf and say, "This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt," Aaron understands their intention and says, "Tomorrow will be a festival to Hashem." Not to the calf, but to Hashem.

So far, not so good, but maybe not so terrible, either. But then, things quickly fell apart. Sacrifices made to the calf. Singing and, euphemistically, dancing. The return of an enraged Moses. A riot, a massacre, a plague. God wasn't too happy about any of it. "They have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them," God says. But, notice, God does not say, "turn aside from Me." The people turned aside from the correct way of approaching God, the way they had been shown—and that led to the process of corruption that led to all the rest.

What is the effect of this commentary? Like Rashi's reading, it serves to lift the sin from the people as a whole, and to exonerate as many as possible. The tribe of Levi, as we know from the plain text, was in the clear. But so, too, were others. When Moses ground up the Golden Calf, sprinkled it over water, and made everyone drink, he was performing a divination ritual, similar to the one used to discover whether a woman had committed adultery. He must have expected many people to fail the test, but others to pass. And even among the guilty, there were degrees of culpability. Did they sacrifice to the Golden Calf? Did they just kiss it, without making a sacrifice? Did they avoid any active sin, but feel pleased in their hearts? Like Abraham negotiating with God over the fate of Soddom and Gomorrah, Ramban keeps trying to get the sentence reduced, for as many of the accused as possible.

[I don't know whether it's intended, but he even provides the material for a special plea bargain for Aaron. Remember that, earlier in the parsha, we read of how God called Bezalel to make the Tabernacle, and gave him the wisdom to do it. Ramban says that without this infusion of wisdom, Bezalel could not possibly have executed all the intricate work required. He had been a slave, and slaves don't do that sort of fine craftsmanship. Bezalel had been hauling bricks and mortar and ruining his hands.

So how is it that Aaron, another former slave, who had (so far as we know) absolutely no artisanal training, how did he manage to make a golden calf? God certainly didn't give him the know-how. If you take into account the proximity of this story to the story of Bezalel, and if you accept Ramban's commentary, then the lamest excuse in all of literature suddenly doesn't sound so lame: "I hurled the gold into the fire and out came this calf." Well, maybe so.]

So, as in Rashi's interpretation, some are guilty, but many beat the rap. And, most important of all, the interpreters of this story get off. What, after all, is the point of the interpretation? It's to give Rashi and Ramban a chance to escape the onus of the Golden Calf—a chance they invent for themselves, by arguing that not all Israel was guilty.

It would be wonderful, if it weren't so obviously wrong.

Who says it's wrong? God, first of all. "Let me alone, that my anger may wax hot against them, and that I may consume them." Not some of them—all.

The narrator—Moses, if you will—says the same. Aaron had let the people loose "for a derision among their enemies." The enemies will not make distinctions. They will mock and scorn all Israel.

The rabbis said that all were guilty, and continue to be. "No punishment ever comes upon Israel in which there is not a small part for the sin of the Golden Calf."

And we, too, may say that all were guilty, if we respond to the scarred and tortured texture of this writing.

So then, what do we make of this wonderful commentary by Ramban? Is it just an exegetical scam? Can we learn nothing from it? On the contrary. I think we can learn a lot. And I want to conclude by suggesting two lessons.

The first is general. This lesson is that Ramban was right to understand corruption as a process. It starts with fear and excusable intentions, and it ends in idolatry and slaughter. This is important for us to know—especially if we accept the fact that stares us in the face, which is that a whole society can become tainted, ourselves included. Corruption is not only individual. It can also be collective, as we might do well to remember in a world where every man slays his brother, his companion, his neighbor.

For example:

I have no examples to give you. I really don't. I didn't get up here to force a guilt-inducing situation upon you. More than one is available—so if you're interested in this first, sociopolitcal lesson, feel free to choose a slide into corruption of your own.

Lesson number two is more specific. It's a kavanah I would like to suggest for today's musaf.

I tend to stick to the text of the Amidah, which means that I repeatedly pray for the restoration of animal sacrifice on the Temple Mount. Now, do I really want such a thing? God forbid. But I say it. Usually, I tell myself that this notion of sacrifice on the Temple Mount is just a symbol, an image, which helps me focus on the higher, spiritual

meaning of service to God. Fine, so far as it goes. But today, when I get to this prayer, I will ask whether this image that directs my attention higher isn't potentially, maybe, just a little, like the Golden Calf that was supposed to direct the Israelites' eyes toward God. Don't get me wrong; I'm not saying it's the same thing. But we davven musaf fast, letting the words pour out. We make it a smooth text.

My kavanah, just for today, is: Rough it up.

Shabbat shalom.

Parshah Ki Tissa begins with mundane census taking, bookkeeping, oil and incense compounding and then, as they would have said in the age of Cecil B. DeMille's *Ten Commandments*, "it explodes off the screen" with apostasy, lewd rites, the destruction of the Tablets and, finally, Moshe asking to be allowed to know God. God acquiesces and, in a scene for which language is entirely inadequate, Moshe has an experience of God's Presence. Now, what intimacy could Moshe be seeking given his existing unique relationship with God? Here Ki Tissa approaches the "deep vast."

The composer, Arnold Schoenberg was born in Vienna in 1874 to an Orthodox mother and non-observant father. Neither as a child nor an adult did he attend synagogue, learn Hebrew or keep kosher. He converted to Protestantism in 1898, at the age of 24, in Catholic Vienna. There is no record of his having received communion nor attending any church. He formally returned to Judaism in1933, with Chagall as a witness. Between 1930 and 1932 he composed his opera, *Moses und Aron*, which is based on parshah Shemot and on Exodus chapter 32, which we just read. This opera serves as Schoenberg's commentary on the chapter and is considered his masterpiece.

The opera opens with Moses saying at the burning bush, "Only one, infinite, thou omnipresent one, unperceived and inconceivable God!" When Moses first informs his brother of the revelation at the burning bush, he says, "How can fantasy thus picture the unimageable?" while Aaron replies, "Love will surely not weary of image forming. Happy is this folk to revere its God so!" Moses tells him they are to be, "Folk set apart to know the ever unseen one, to reflect on greatness unimaged." Aaron retorts, "…can you worship what you dare not even conceive?" And the Israelites reply that they do not wish to be redeemed by such a God.

Act II begins with the seventy elders and the priests lamenting: "Forty days now we have awaited Moses…" [for an]… Unperceivable command from One who's yet unperceived…" Aaron tries to explain Moses' position that "you cannot expect form before idea," but he adds, "O Israel, my Brother Moses tarries where he always is…close to his God." With the people in despair, Aaron says, "O Israel, I return your gods to you…just as you have demanded." The people reply, "O gods, near to all our feelings, O gods, we can understand you."

Moses returns and asks Aaron, "Grant you now the power which ideas have over both word and image?" Aaron replies: "I love this humble folk. I live just for them and want to sustain them." Moses says: "My love is for my idea. I live just for it!" Aaron responds: "No folk is faithful, unless it feels." Schoenberg has Moses smash the tablets not on first returning from Sinai and seeing the people corrupting themselves, but rather after Aaron argues that the Tablets of the Law themselves represent inexact images of the pure idea. At the end of act II, Moses sinks to the ground in despair saying, "O word, thou word, that I lack!" knowing he can never transmit the idea of God in words.

In act III, Aaron appeals to Moses: "I was to speak in images while you spoke in ideas; I was to speak to the heart and you to the mind." Moses attacks Aaron saying,

"You have betrayed God to the gods, the idea to images, this chosen folk to others, the extraordinary to the commonplace" so that Aaron falls down dead.

Aaron is the great politician who understands the people's frailties and what is needed to wean them from idolatry. He favors heart over mind, metaphor over purity of idea. But Schoenberg, in a letter to Jewish musicians worldwide written in 1933, maintained his commitment to "...the duties imposed on the Jewish people by virtue of its special status as God's Chosen People, a people destined to preserve a thought, the thought of the One, Inconceivable God."

In parallel with this, Schoenberg wrote in 1937 about his crusade to establish twelve-tone serialism in music: "I had to express what was necessary to be expressed and I knew I had the duty of developing ideas for the sake of progress in music, whether I liked it or not; but I also had to realize that the great majority of the public did not like it." Of this, Leon Botstein wrote: "Schoenberg shattered the listener's ability to hear psychologically."

The impossibility of fulfilling this extreme form of his cerebral, rarefied notion of Judaism solely involving allegiance to an utterly unimaged abstract deity was, perhaps, best demonstrated by the fact that Schoenberg failed just as his Moses had. Schoenberg published the opera in 1932 without any music having been composed for the third act. For twenty years he wrote about his struggles to compose the music saying, as for example in a letter from 1949: "But I have already *conceived* to a great extent the music for the third act, and believe that I would be able to *write* it in only a few months..." Schoenberg died in 1951 never having completed the third act.

A dance does not exist apart from the dancer's body, for "who can tell the dancer from the dance?" But music is perfect only in the composer's mind and is altered, lessened, by redaction to musical notation. The proof of this is that though the music is set down in black and white, we speak of each musician's interpretation of it. Schoenberg must have believed with Keats that "Music heard is sweet, but music unheard is sweeter" but learned with Eliot that "Between the idea and the reality, falls a shadow." So it can be with Torah. As Rabbi Mendel of Rymanov said, all that was revealed at Sinai was the initial aleph of anohi ("I am"). Of this Gershon Scholem wrote: "To hear the aleph is to hear next to nothing; it is the preparation for all audible language, but in itself conveys no determinate, specific meaning. Thus...Rabbi Mendel transformed the revelation on Mount Sinai into a mystical revelation, pregnant with infinite meaning, but without specific meaning."

But to Rabbi Mendel, and presumably Moshe, the encounter at Sinai involved, at least in part, a numinous transport by which to nurture a striving towards God. For Schoenberg, a cognitive awareness, not an experience, of pure thought barren of metaphor, emotion or mitzvah was the ideal.

There will always remain the allure of approach to the God-head, of a personal experience of the Divine. Yes, it is true, Wittgenstein said in his *Tractatus,* the foundation of analytic philosophy: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent." Isaac Luria, the master Kabbalist, explained why he wrote nothing of his mystical experiences thusly: "It is impossible, because all things are interrelated. I can hardly open my mouth to speak without feeling as though the sea burst its dams and overflowed." But Prophets cannot be silent. In Ezekiel's vision of the merkava [1:1-28], he represents his struggle in imparting his experience to a listener by loading the

description with words that distance and qualify: "like the likeness of a throne, as the appearance of a sapphire stone; and upon the likeness of the throne was a likeness as the appearance of a man."

And so it should not be forgotten that Wittgenstein in his later work said, "There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They make themselves manifest. They are what is mystical." In his 1929 lecture on ethics, he said: "The tendency of all [people] who ever tried to write or talk Ethics or Religion was to run against the boundaries of language." He also observed that, "The mystical is not how the world is, but that it is." The study of the Zohar, the practice of ecstatic Kabbalah and the transports of dance and joy introduced by the Hasidim were intended to provide mystical and emotional balance to an increasingly analytical system.

Ten years ago I was summoned to the Emergency Department at Maimonides Medical Center to follow-up on the proposed psychiatric admission of a patient who had been determined by neurology to be psychotic with which diagnosis the on-call psychiatric resident had concurred. The patient was a Sudanese Moslem engineer who had been found praying constantly for God's forgiveness while lying supine with his eyes closed, often repeating the name of his dead mother. I determined that the patient was in complex partial seizure status and arranged for his admission to Medicine. The next day the patient related how he had been in a state of rapture in which he felt suspended in mid-air and heard angels' voices addressing him as he preached the Koran to Mohammed and the assembled host. With his scientific background and my explanation of the nature of his seizure he could intellectually grasp what had neurologically transpired. Nevertheless, at an emotional, existential level the experiences of his complex partial seizures were more real than those of his quotidian life. The pre-existing learned contents of his religious memory supplied the details of his vision, but the discharge of the temporal lobe limbic system circuits provided the sense of transport and absolute subjective conviction.

Dostoevsky, an epileptic, in his novel *The Idiot* has Prince Myshkin say of his epileptic aura: "The air was filled with a big noise, and I thought it had engulfed me. I have really touched God. He came into me myself; yes, God exists, I cried, and I don't remember anything else…I don't know if this felicity lasts for seconds, hours or months, but…for all the joys that life may bring I would not exchange this one!"

When I was still a resident, I chose to attend the thirty day Outward Bound program on Hurricane Island, Maine. Of the twelve crews in the program at the time, two were selected for the more demanding arrangement which involved leaving the home island and spending the thirty days constantly on the move either by rowing or sailing and sleeping in our pulling boats or encamped over night on one of the many islands along the coast. One feature of this special program was the 'solo' in which each participant was cast off on a separate island for three days living off the land. I was the only one placed on a completely uninhabited island which was only about the equivalent of one half block square and which had no source of food I could find despite our training. I collected ample rainwater with the plastic sheeting of my shelter but I simply did not eat for three days. This was not a problem and I felt well. The waves were my companions, the sand my palimpsest and I was a harp for the winds; my Judaean Desert. On the third day, I was observing the face of a seagull who had alighted on the island when I became aware of my ego boundaries beginning to dissolve and I had the distinct

sensation of my consciousness starting to merge with that of the seagull. I was disconcerted by this and was unsure if I would be able to control the process and return to myself later; so I pulled back anxiously. Being delirious from dehydration and the sun would be the simple explanation. Yet as the long day wore on and those factors presumably worsened, I was unable to repeat the experience.

It is undeniable that all mystical transports and oneiric experiences represent altered brain states. Those brain circuits which are involved in the ecstatic conditions of complex partial seizures must, at least in part, subserve non-epileptic experiences of the numinous. Saver and Rabin have written about the probable neuro-anatomical candidates for such experiences but add: "The external reality of religious percepts is neither confirmed nor disconfirmed by establishing brain correlates of religious experience." That is, what is crucially indeterminate, given that we can only apprehend with our brains, is whether those circuits, in people in states of mystical transport in the absence of demonstrable seizure discharge, are generating the experience from within or are becoming receptive to some source or some reality from without.

Many of you may recall that earlier in his young life Eli, Dianne's and Larry's son, for a period of time developed the habit of walking up to people in shul, capturing their gaze as he studied their faces and asking if they were God. Once I was by the aron when I noticed Eli looking up at me with that expression of his at once blank, open, innocent and accepting. He asked me if I was God, expecting an answer. When he was informed that his quest had been fruitless once again, he wandered off, neither sadder nor wiser. Sometime later Eli experienced a series of seizures contemporaneous with a neurological regression which seemed to leave him more remote. Alas, it seems our little Argonaut of God has become lost in the sea of his neural circuits and cannot report on a new found land. But Eli was a natural disciple of Levinas seeking God in people's faces. And why not? Bereshit tells us "And God created humans in God's image, in the image of God, God created them."

Unetaneh Tokef is usually regarded as the most dramatic of the piyyutim employed in the Rosh Hashanah liturgy, ending as it does with "teshuvah, tefilah and tzedakah," but I want to consider here: "The great shofar is sounded and a still, small voice is heard." This phrase is taken from the story of Elijah after he has fled following the defeat of the prophets of Baal and he has an encounter with God initiated by what is usually translated as "a still small voice." Only after Elijah hears this "…behold God's voice came unto him." As Jeffrey Cohen points out, kol demamah dakah is not well captured by the standard translation. He says: "The Hebrew word demamah is from a root …meaning "to be (struck) dumb," "to be silent." It is very difficult, therefore, to make sense of this concept, of a voice that is both "silent" and yet, at the same time, "small" or "thin!" It clearly can only refer, therefore, to an inner voice…that the God-intoxicated swear they can hear…" And it is only after this inner experience that God's voice can be heard on Rosh Hashanah or any other time.

'Hope' is the thing with feathers-
That perches in the soul-
And *sings the tune without the words*-
And never stops at all-

Eagles, hawks, falcons and other such birds are all placed in the Linnaean category of raptors because, as the Latin origin implies, they seize and lift up their prey. And so "rapture" represents a lifting up, but raptors are treif and so is the Fundamentalist Christian concept of rapture. But to be drawn out of one's ego, to feel viscerally a part of something larger than oneself, to be transported with song and hypnotized with chant, to add Hasidus to our overly Litvish natures, is to taste of "the beyond that lies within." The most moving and profound experiences of life partake of these qualities. But it appears that in my encounter with the seagull, I had a "fear of flying."

It has been said that Rabbi Heschel's scholarship was not fully appreciated in his time because of the mystical component of his personality and his writings. He wrote: "To the analytical mind, the universe is broken apart. It is split into the known and unknown, into the seen and the unseen. But, in the mystic contemplation, all things are seen as one" and "To the minds of those who do not make the universal mistake of assuming as known a world that is unknown, of placing the solution before the enigma, the abundance of the utterable can never displace the world of the ineffable." And so Kohelet tells us: "[God] brings everything to pass precisely at its time; God also puts enigma in their mind, but without man ever guessing, from first to last, all the things that God brings to pass."

As the epigraph on Ellen's and David's wedding bencher has it: "Days pass and the years vanish, and we walk sightless among miracles."

Yehee ratzon milfarnecha…May it be Thy will, O Lord our God that I be able to traverse the distance between us the next time I encounter the seagull.

Yehee ratzon milfarnecha…May it be Thy will, O Lord our God that the next time I encounter the people here assembled that they appear to me as seagulls.

Howard L. Berkowitz
March 14, 2009

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# KI TISA

Ron Meyers

Minyan Maat, February 15, 2014

The Golden Calf – is an impressive achievement, in a way: having received only 10 commandments at this point (not yet 613), the Israelites, in one fell swoop, violate the first three. (And, if the scene at the GC is as licentious as it's sometimes depicted, perhaps they've violated the last two as well.)

The GC is one of the moral low points in the entire bible narrative, a point of maximal disjunction between Gd and His people. But I have a lot of sympathy for the people. They have moved from Egypt, one of the richest cultures in history, to the desert – from *cosmos* to *chaos*. They obviously were at the rock-bottom of that great culture, of course, but they were in it, fleshpots and all. What a shock to go from that to a land of nothingness – to a complete absence of culture, where there is neither top nor bottom – nor fleshpots, nor, in fact, food of any recognizable kind. They are in a completely liminal state – neither here nor there. They have all the potential of undefined possibilities – and all the discomfort and insecurity as well.

They are suspended between here and there in space, and also in time. Moses is gone on the mountan for **40 days** – imagine waiting 40 days for anything. (Waiting for kid to clean his room. Waiting for someone to return a call. Waiting to be paid. Have you ever made a client wait for 40 days? Not good for business.)

In particular, what does 40 days feel like when you don't know how long you will have to wait? It probably feels like *twice* as long as 39 days.

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I can tell you exactly what 40 days feels like. That's how long we've been reading this story! Remember reading the 10 Commandments? That was Parashat Yitro, when Moses first ascended the mountain – 5 weeks ago = 35 days, first read on Monday, 5 days earlier = 40 days.

Whether we realize it or not, in reading the story of these 40 days, we have enacted the very time period that we are reading about. Our regular cycle of readings has given us the opportunity to feel the very experience that we are contemplating .

**That is what ritual does.** Ritual connects us from our individual lives to the story that is bigger than ourselves, from the narrative of our personal lives, to the narratives that have carried our collective consciousness, our ideas, questions and identities, across the centuries. A few weeks from now we will celebrate Purim – connecting our lives to the stories we have told about ourselves. Then we connect to our mythic history again at Pesach.

Pesach is the festival of ritual *par excellence*. We don't grapple directly with the Big Ideas of the day.

We mediate the distance between ourselves and the Big Ideas through ritual. The Seder

does not open with the question "This Experience of Redemption: What does it mean?" It opens with "This matza: what does it mean?", "These bitter herbs: what do they mean?" The emphasis is on the physical objects. We surround ourselves with mnemonics that gradually lead us in to the story and eventually to the big ideas.

We put the concepts into a set of meaning-laden objects, which we put on the table, on the page, and into our bodies.[1] We translate the great abstractions down to a human scale that we can deal with.

So: **Immersed as we are in ritual acts, how completely can we blame the Israelites for creating a ritual to relieve the vacuum?**

WHAT "SEDER" WAS THERE AT THE GOLDEN CALF? What observance? Our text doesn't tell us what exactly was said and done at the GC. But it was not mere chaos – there was an orderly call to a ritual festival, there were different, specific kinds of offerings.

And it does say that there was dancing. Maybe it was dancing of the most immoral kind – orgiastic, licentious, ecstatic. And we are certainly not obligated to give them the benefit of the doubt.

But maybe it was dancing like we do at Simchat Torah?

[1] (Re: putting things ritually into the body – Punishment for CG: forcing the leaders to drink the gold dust; like the Sotah. Note the resonance on the issue of unfaithfulness.)

And maybe there was someone saying, "This Golden Calf, what does it mean?"

L'havdil: dancing around the GC is not equivalent to dancing around the Torah. But we ought to be impressed in some way that without yet having received the Torah, the people had the desire to express their spirit in dance – and ritual and sacrifice. Gd had not yet delivered the law, but He created us with that spirit. And perhaps we ought to be impressed that living in a complete vacuum of culture, the Israelites created some kind of culture for themselves.

Whatever observance there was, whatever dancing, whatever symbolic activity was enacted, it was all the forerunners of our dancing and our observances and our symbolic activity, just as the Israelites in the desert – crude and clueless as they may have been – were the ancestors of our people today.

**The desire to give expression to spiritual feelings in space and time is fundamental to human experience.** We are beings that are uniquely gifted with the capacity for abstract thought. But that's not all we are. We are members of the animal kingdom, reliant on concrete physical experiences. It is only by taking instruction that we are able to move from our physical circumstances to the higher plane.

The Torah is that instruction. What does it tell us?

Our text could have perfectly well been assembled to show a nice linear movement from

chaos to cosmos – Moses goes up to the mountain, comes back with the law, and we follow the law. But that's not the story we have. Our story shows us that it's much more complicated, much more difficult, to bridge that vast divide.

**Even Moses wants a sensory experience in space and time.** He asks to see Gd's glory. Mind you: this is after the GC experience and its demonstration of what calamity can come of the desire for a physical experience of Gd. That's how basic the desire is, even for Moses.

So, Gd grants his request, in a way, passing by in some mysterious physical encounter. But this physical encounter results primarily, and paradoxically, in Gd proclaiming a new set of abstractions: *"Adonai, Adonai, El rachum v'chanun, erech apayim v'rav chesed..."*

Which only emphasizes, that even for Moses **the gap between the human and the divine is very great.** If even Moses cannot have a direct encounter, what about the rest of us?

At Sinai, the direct experience of Gd was synesthetic: *"They saw the thunder sounds."* It overflowed the normal bounds of physical sensation. Which sounds pretty cool, perhaps, but it is also very upsetting. The Israelites don't care for it at all, and in the very next verse, they plead with Moses to intercede so that they can avoid the direct experience of Gd.

To have intimations of transcendence is one of the vast gift of being human – the ability

to have some intellectual and spiritual grasp of the divine. But we are not actually equipped to grasp it very much. Gd's name remains ineffable.

My favorite expression of this is in Arnold Schoenberg's opera *Moses and Aron*. In this treatment of the story, Moses smashes the tablets not in anger at the Golden Calf, but in unbearable frustration in his inability to translate the divine message into a form that humans can understand. The curtain falls on him singing the lament, "Oh, the Word that I lack!"

Moses is the translator between the two realms – only he has the ability to speak with Gd and with the people. But only he knows how much is lost in the translation.

The loss in translation is especially acute, when we realize that many of the laws that Gd was giving to Moses were exactly the laws of ritual: the tabernacle, the priests, what they will say and do and wear. All the laws about how to do properly all the things that the people are, at the very same time, doing improperly.

But how were they to know? The exquisite details that we have been reading the past few weeks were all spoken between Gd and Moses, up on the mountaintop are very, very far from the people below.

The whole parasha feels to me like a split-screen scene in a movie: The scene on the mountain with Moses and Gd in intense communion, losing all track of time, existing in

the scale of eternal time, and talking about what will be in the future. And the scene below, with mounting anxiety. Where there is a need in the present that can't wait for a vision of the future.

It would have been one thing if Gd had given the all the laws of ritual and holiness to the people, and then they kept worshipping idols. The fact that they had not yet received all these laws – this opens the possibility for **forgiveness**.

Forgiveness is a real question here. We must ask how it is that Gd forgives the people, after this great breach of His most fundamental commandments, and even allows Aaron, davka the ringleader, to become, davka, the priest, with all of his descendants holding that status forever.

The interesting thing is that there's remarkably little drama over it. It is nothing like Abraham's debate with Gd at Sedom and Amora. Moses makes a plea, invoking the name of Abraham, reminding Gd of His promises. And Gd relents.

Gd is not said to "forgive". It syas "vayinacham Hashem"[2] Only to reconsider or renounce, or relent. In some translations, to regret. The phrasing suggests that is not the people's sin that He forgives. It is His own reaction to it that he reconsiders. The focus is not on the people's action – the rightness or wrongness of it is perhaps ambiguous, and isn't discussed. The focus is on Gd's reaction to it. His tshuva is a

[2] 32:14

realization that there is another way forward.

Gd realizes that He and the People were talking about the same thing, at the same time: *How should you express yourselves to Me? How shall I make Myself available to you?* They just weren't yet talking to each other.

In the coming parshayot, they will receive the law – and then, for a very brief period of time, they will carry it out to the letter, in glorious communion with Gd. It's a rare moment of great unity. Indeed, the moments of such connection are rare in our lives. These are the moments we yearn for – perhaps only a handful in any person's life. Arthur Miller expressed this kind of moment in *After the Fall*: "How few are the days that hold our lives in place, like a tapestry hung on four or five hooks."

**The fact that we are able to move from the golden calf, onward to the tabernacle tells us everything we need to know.** A story that unfolded directly from the giving of the law to the fulfillment of the law would tell us very little – it would seem obvious and inevitable and therefore unremarkable. But when we move from promise, to conflict, and then to repair and resolution, that is an achievement. Moving from the GC now, to the glorious building of the Tabernacle a few weeks from now, tells us everything.

It tells us that we in the human realm and Gd in the divine realm are always talking to each other – even if the connection is imperfect most of the time.

It tells us that if we are not hearing Gd, or Gd is not hearing us, it's not that we're out of touch. It's that we're somehow not hearing each other, somehow not connecting. There's something lost in the translation.

And it tells us that when our attempt at translation fails, we shouldn't tear up the manuscript, we shouldn't smash the tablets. We keep talking to each other, we write a new draft. We give it another try. The conversation is always there, just waiting for us to find our way to it.

# Dvar torah Ki Tisa/Parah 6 March 2021 [virtual]

## 1. Introduction

Golden calf. Know well. What caught my attention, is that the Torah speaks in the scene of a molten calf. מַסֵּכָה עֵגֶל It does appear as golden calf elsewhere in Tanakh, but not here. Not as big a misunderstanding of Joseph's coat being of many colors, but what is up with this?

A chance to reflect on idolatry. Not of great relevance to us. A chance perhaps to reflect on statues of saints in Catholic churches, or Orthodox icons, or statues of Buddha or Hindu gods. But in general remote to us, like sacrifices (with which there are some associations)

Of relevance to us. Facile to say, contemporary idolatry of money, or status. But I think there's more. What are the ways of being in the world where gold, or calves, could have meaning, could be ways of bringing an elusive divine presence into proximity? Are there qualities of gold or of calves that mark them as distinctively significant elements of divine creation? Is there a way that we can be guided in our lives, as individuals and as a community by a recognition of such qualities, by the possibility of the existence of such qualities?

I certainly am not proposing that we make golden calves. The people's sin was grievous, and they were duly punished. But I'd like to explore the seriousness of their acts. It's not js and suggest that the magnitude of the sin came not just from a general violation of a fundamental commandment, but also from the specific details of the ways in which they violated it. They used the right elements wrongly, and in a way their actions can show us the importance of using elements that are right for our time, and the right way to use them.

The recent parshahs show us a lot about combining different elements. Just to review quickly, after the revelation in Exodus 19-20, we get the laws of the covenant in 20-23, the ritual that marks the completion of the covenant in 24, the sanctuary in 25-27, the priest's garments and details onf sacrifices in 28-31, And now in 32 we get the 35 verses that tell the complete story of the molten, or golden calf: the people were concerned that Moses was delayed, and aske Aaron

to make a god to go before them. Aaron gathers the golden earrings which they have, we gather they are the ones that the Egyptians gave them. He makes a molten calf. They say that this is the god that brought them out of Egypt, Aaron makes an altar, made offerings and celebrated. God sends Moses down, telling him how angry he is, and how ready he is to wipe them out. Moses and God have one of their typical conversations, Moses calms God down. Moses picks up Joshua on his way down the mountain. When Moses hears the sound/voice from the camp, and realizes that it's their singing, and sees the golden calf, he gets angry, smashes the two tablets of the covenant. He burns the calf, grinds it to powder and makes them drink it. He confronts Aaron, who makes feeble excuses—echoes of God's earlier confrontations, go back to Adam and to Cain. Moses tells the Levites, who hadn't joined in the worship, to kill those who were worshipping the golden calf. Moses talks with God, God says he will smite those who sinned against him. We then get 33, a close scene between God and Moses, the second set of tablets in 34, and the story continues.

The bigger punishment comes in Numbers, after the twelve scouts return and the people again lose faith, and God says that they will wander in the desert for forty years. It is interesting to reflect why idolatry alone was not reason. God emphasizes the repeated rejections of the people.

## Number 14

כב כִּי כָל-הָאֲנָשִׁים, הָרֹאִים
אֶת-כְּבֹדִי וְאֶת-אֹתֹתַי, אֲשֶׁר-
עָשִׂיתִי בְּמִצְרַיִם, וּבַמִּדְבָּר;
וַיְנַסּוּ אֹתִי, זֶה עֶשֶׂר פְּעָמִים,
וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ, בְּקוֹלִי.

**22** surely all those men that have seen My glory, and My signs, which I wrought in Egypt and in the wilderness, yet have put Me to proof these ten times, and have not hearkened to My voice;

כג אִם-יִרְאוּ, אֶת-הָאָרֶץ,
אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי, לַאֲבֹתָם; וְכָל-
מְנַאֲצַי, לֹא יִרְאוּהָ.

**23** surely they shall not see the land which I swore unto their fathers, neither shall any of them that despised Me see it.

## 2. idolatry

This familiar story is a long account of idolatry in the Torah, though there are other scenes elsewhere in the Tanakh. We can see that it is tempting for the people, and dangerous.

I think that idolatry feels like a familiar concept to many of us, one of the things that we don't do. Our God is one, not many; our God is invisible, not in objects. It's simple, a red line. And it also seems kind of stupid. The familiar story of Abraham in his father's idol shop.

There's a familiar passage from Psalm 115 about idols

### Psalms 115

ה פֶּה-לָהֶם, וְלֹא יְדַבֵּרוּ; עֵינַיִם לָהֶם, וְלֹא יִרְאוּ.

**5** They have mouths, but they speak not; eyes have they, but they see not;

ו אָזְנַיִם לָהֶם, וְלֹא יִשְׁמָעוּ; אַף לָהֶם, וְלֹא יְרִיחוּן.

**6** They have ears, but they hear not; noses have they, but they smell not;

ז יְדֵיהֶם, וְלֹא יְמִישׁוּן-- רַגְלֵיהֶם, וְלֹא יְהַלֵּכוּ; לֹא-יֶהְגּוּ, בִּגְרוֹנָם.

**7** They have hands, but they handle not; feet have they, but they walk not; neither speak they with their throat.

These verses list body parts, and shows how they do not function. Interestingly, this list overlaps very closely with the specific body parts of God that are referenced in the Torah. Of this list of seven, the only one not mentioned for God is the throat, which I think is covered by the mouth; the parts of God not mentioned in this list are the arm and the finger, associated with the hand. The Psalm doesn't mention God's face explicitly but does include eyes, nose and mouth. This parallel shows the danger of idolatry, and its power as well: to capture much of what humans know of the divine.

There are a couple of ways we can explain why the people turned to the calf, so soon after the abundance evidence of God's power in the ten plagues, parting of the Red Sea and the revelation at Sinai. We can imagine that it was the legacy of

centuries of slavery in Egypt, just being accustomed to having idols around, or perhaps the deep unfamiliarity of this area outside Egypt. And in their weakness, they miss Moses after an absence of some weeks.

It is possible that God's instructions were not crystal clear. The commandments about idolatry are not very long, but they are a bit repetitive, creating some space for interpretation and doubt.

ב אָנֹכִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ, אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עֲבָדִים: לֹא-יִהְיֶה לְךָ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים, עַל-פָּנָי.

2 I am the LORD thy God, who brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt have no other gods before Me.

ג לֹא-תַעֲשֶׂה לְךָ פֶסֶל, וְכָל-תְּמוּנָה, אֲשֶׁר בַּשָּׁמַיִם מִמַּעַל, וַאֲשֶׁר בָּאָרֶץ מִתָּחַת--וַאֲשֶׁר בַּמַּיִם, מִתַּחַת לָאָרֶץ.

3 Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image, nor any manner of likeness, of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth;

It could just be enough to say, have no other gods before me. But no, it goes on to point to idols as prohibited in some additional way. And that commandment is double too, pesel v'khal t'moona is often taken as a double prohibition, pesel is a graven object, t'moona is an image. It will soon turn out that some graven things are okay, in the chapter after next, 34, we will hear God telling Moses to pesel, to hew the stone tablets on which he will write, and the word is used as well for the construction of Solomon's temple. So perhaps the sin is in making a graven image, but the word image is separated. And then there's the bit about things in heaven or earth or in the water. The Torah has just described the tabernacle, with the two cherubim, precisely detailed. (Whether this comes just before or just after is not clear, but the association is there.) The people would know that there were cherubim in the heavens, and on earth as well, the one in Genesis 3 that guards the tree of life in the Garden of Eden after the expulsion. Chizkuni among others in the Talmud noticed this anomaly and sought to establish a workaround. I'm not so sure about the waters—maybe they don't need to breath, or they had a submarine, or scuba gear.

What is very clear is that the people sinned by worshiping the calf. They were the ones to proclaim that the calf was their god; Aaron just replied that there would be a feast tomorrow to Adonai, certainly flirting with the idea as well.

## 3. The Things They Carried

I'd like to shift here. Focus not on centuries of slavery and exposure to idols, or to short absence of Moses, but rather, the weeks leading up to the construction of the calf. What came to mind as I wa thinking about them was "The Things They Carried," the title story of a collection by Tim O'Brien, a writer whose fiction centers on the war in Vietnam. The story evokes the experiences of the men by the objects that they carried with them, some issued by the military, some personal.

What were the people carrying with them when they came to Sinai? What objects did they have when they were troubled by Moses' long absence?

They had flocks of sheep and goats, and herds of cattle.

They were carrying the gold and silver that the Egyptians had given them.

They were carrying Joseph's centuries-old bones in some kind of aron, as we know from Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael 13:19 paralleing the ark that held the lukhot habrit.

And they were carrying the instructions for the tabernacle, which had the cherubim, and for the priest's robe, with its gold elements, including the bells which alternated with poemgratnes at its hem.

So my suggestion here is that the people were not ignoring God and his commandments when they made the molten calf. They had been listening to God, recognizing the elements that God had emphasized, gold, cattle, physical objects, finding the divine presence in the world. They should have listened more clearly, and some died as a result. But others would see these elements, combined correctly, in the tabernacle and in rituals, and through them connect

with the divine presence. And there are lessons for us as well, in seeing the things in the world.

Let's look at those elements individually.

## 4. Gold

Exodus contains by far the most references to gold of any book of the Tanakh, 88, way head of the second, Numbers, with 23.

And gold is privileged above other objects: mentioned first in lists of precious items, displayed most prominently. The central part of the tabernacle.

It may seem obvious that gold is precious. We are accustomed to thinking of it as scarce and expensive. But I'd like to drop the perspective of our culture and see what it might have meant to the Israelites, and how they understood it might matter to God.

There are five properties I'd like to mention, three with direct support from texts, two a bit speculative.

I'll open with the first speculative element: gold's mutability, its potential to take any form. It is uniquely malleable (there is one reference in the tanakh to trumpets of hammered silver, but all other references to hammering are to gold and the shapes it can take—cherubim, and the Philistines even make golden mice and representations of some kind of tumor or boil.) Gold can be melted and poured, a quality usually associated with liquids like wine and oil.

The second speculative one, gold's luster. I've been struck with the Tanakh's appreciation of things that have a sheen to them: linen can be seen as finer than wool. Anointing with olive oil makes the hair shiny. And gold too has a glow. Its ability to become molten, to flow, associates it with oil, also a source of light. I don't have this point entirely worked out yet—I will remain attentive to it. It seems to me that light—the first thing that was created—plays a major role. In our culture, we sharply distinguish reflected light from light that comes from radiant sources; I wonder whether the Tanakh also recognizes things that glow. We are suspicious of glitter; they may have cherished it.

Thirdly, the first that is supported: gold can be found everywhere, because it is portable. For all that gold is heavy, small items of gold jewelry can be carried. I think of Isaac's servant meeting Rebecca by the well, gave her a gold ring and two gold bracelets Genesis 24. Taken together with its mutability and its sheen, this suggests that gold is universal, coextensive with the cosmos, with creation.

Fourthly, the second one with textual support, more explicit: gold can be pure. Zahav tahor is a phrase that appears again and again.Purity associated with holiness. The word tahor, purity, is associated with a wide but bounded set of objects: animals, the menorah, place outside camp, unpolluted water sources, seeds. Human bodies too can be pure or impure. There is another word use for the purity of olive oil, tak.

The final one lies in the verb to test לבחון l'bachon applies to individual or people whose loyalty can be tested, and to their hearts and to their words. Its first appearance in the Torah is in the words of Joseph, speaking to his brothers soon after they meet in Egypt and before he has revealed himself to them, asking them to bring Benjamin.

Genesis Chapter 42

| | |
|---|---|
| טו בְּזֹאת, תִּבָּחֲנוּ: חֵי פַרְעֹה אִם-תֵּצְאוּ מִזֶּה, כִּי אִם-בְּבוֹא אֲחִיכֶם הַקָּטֹן הֵנָּה. | **15** Hereby ye shall be proved, as Pharaoh liveth, ye shall not go forth hence, except your youngest brother come hither. |
| טז שִׁלְחוּ מִכֶּם אֶחָד, וְיִקַּח אֶת-אֲחִיכֶם, וְאַתֶּם הֵאָסְרוּ, וְיִבָּחֲנוּ דִּבְרֵיכֶם הַאֱמֶת אִתְּכֶם; וְאִם-לֹא--חֵי פַרְעֹה, כִּי מְרַגְּלִים אַתֶּם. | **16** Send one of you, and let him fetch your brother, and ye shall be bound, that your words may be proved, whether there be truth in you; or else, as Pharaoh liveth, surely ye are spies.' |

And strikingly, The Tanakh frequently applies it to gold, which is assayed. A suggestion that gold represents truth—a sign of commitment, even more than purity. This may be a reason for the calf being made of molten rather than beaten gold: a way to assure its purity, as well as a way to fully combine all the contributed pieces.

וְהָיָה בְכָל-הָאָרֶץ, נְאֻם-יְהוָה,
פִּי-שְׁנַיִם בָּהּ, יִכָּרְתוּ יִגְוָעוּ;
וְהַשְּׁלִשִׁית, יִוָּתֵר בָּהּ.

8 And it shall come to pass, that in all the land, saith the LORD, two parts therein shall be cut off and die; but the third shall be left therein.

ט וְהֵבֵאתִי אֶת-הַשְּׁלִשִׁית, בָּאֵשׁ,
וּצְרַפְתִּים כִּצְרֹף אֶת-הַכֶּסֶף,
וּבְחַנְתִּים כִּבְחֹן אֶת-הַזָּהָב; הוּא
יִקְרָא בִשְׁמִי, וַאֲנִי אֶעֱנֶה אֹתוֹ--
אָמַרְתִּי עַמִּי הוּא, וְהוּא יֹאמַר
יְהוָה אֱלֹהָי. {פ}

9 And I will bring the third part through the fire, and will refine them as silver is refined, and will try them as gold is tried; they shall call on My name, and I will answer them; I will say: 'It is My people', and they shall say: 'The LORD is my God.' {**P**}

Taken together, these qualities suggest that gold has a unique proximity to holiness.

## 5. Calves

Calves, and cattle more generally, play a role here as well. They are mentioned frequently in Exodus, 16 times, making the book a close second in the Tanakh to Numbers, where they appear 17 times.

The people, in the weeks leading up to the events of this parshah, have been seeing and hearing quite a bit of cattle. Of the ten plagues, the fifth and the tenth—the most severe of the first and second halves—involve cattle. The fifth is the pestilence or plague of animals, including cattle as well as all others. Murrain in my childhood hagadah, an obscure word. The tenth is the killing of the firstborn, here only of humans and cattle.

Cattle figure twice in the other set of ten, the ten commandments, also divided between the first and second sets of five. The fourth, Shabbat, commands rest for everyone in the household, including servants and slaves. It also mentions cattle, and the stranger within thy gates. The cattle are mentioned before the stranger, because they are a closer part of the household. They are not a tool, muktze, not to be picked up on Shabbat; they too have labors, the capacity to make, from which they must rest. The tenth lists the things not to covet: house, wife, servants, cattle and donkeys.

They appear in the laws of the covenant as well: distinguishing an ox known to gore, and an ox that has not gored before. In other words, each ox is an individual with its particular habits that the humans in the area know. And they feature prominently in the sacrifices, as part of the largest and most significant ones, including the ritual that marks the acceptance of the covenant itself.

Cattle seem the closest to human of all animals. They are members of the household—with individuals assigned the responsibility to assure their rest. Each one is an individual, and the household head has a responsibility to know at least one characteristic—its propensity to gore. But they also serve as an element in sacrifice, to bring people close to God.

And they have a historical role as well. The settling of the promised land would be impossible without oxen to plow.

Cattle seem endowed uniquely with vitality, and they are the junior partners of humanity. A powerful position. They are a powerful representation of the ability of an element of God's creation to sustain us.

## 6. the molten calf

These weeks had been filled with lessons, not just of liberation and revelation, but also of new understandings of familiar things, the things they carried: gold, cattle. And they were given instructions for new things as well, including golden cherubim, new sacrifices of cattle. The great sin of idolatry was a confusion of

these things: certainly a failure to obey commandments, but also a failure to understand the commandments.

Moses acted both impulsively—smashing the first tablets—and wisely—demonstrating the simple material nature of the molten calf, putting it through fire once again, and pulverizing it. He would soon be instructed to make a pesel, the two tablets: these would become holy objects, providing an example, along with Joseph's bones, of revering objects without worshiping them.

Gold and cattle would continue to be means of recognizing the power of God. The people participated in that: donating gold again, even more the second time, for the tabernacle, celebrating cattle through sacrifice rather than through making a physical image. Even if God can be described through abstract concepts: unity, invisibility, God's creation can be closely observed, deeply experienced, as a conduit to participating in a world of order and purpose.

## 7. what for us?

How God Become Real. Does Knowing God Just take Practice? A play on practice. This amazing book by a fellow anthropologist, Tanya Luhrmann.

The molten calf was one way to make God real. It was the wrong way, but it shares important elements with what Exodus tells us is the right way: recognizing that gold and calves can be present architecture and ritual to reveal the divine order into which we were created, and which can guide us.

This parshah helps me think of how to live in another era of great transformation, not just for the Jewish people but for all humanity. In this time of urgent attention to environmental sustainability, many people rethink gold, because the mines that produce it are so destructive: many of them small, unregulated mines where poor workers use mercury to extract ore, poisoning themselves and entire watersheds, facing risks. And cattle are recognized as a major source of greenhouse gasses, through their digestion and through the deforestation that cattle production has brough in the Amazon and elsewhere.

But this parshah also shows not to reduce minerals and animals to inert objects, to design optimal policies to regulate them to achieve certain goals. Rather, it tells us to live in the world, to look, to see meaning. And to fit those elements together well, and carefully: not to treat them as idols. Eat less meat. Think twice before buying something, even if we can afford it. It's not just good for the planet, it's a new way of experiencing the planet. Whatever our practices may be, they can include, not only the abstraction of a unitary and invisible God, but the concreteness of the material world.

***What Doesn't Moses See When Moses Doesn't See It***

**Dvar Torah: Parshat Ki Tisa Exodus 30:11-34:35**

**March 11, 2023; Marcia Pally**

In this parsha, all the sexy stuff is about the Golden Calf—but, spoiler alert, we're not going to do any of that. We're going to look at Moses, out there in the desert asking to see God's *kavod*, Exodus 33:18, (וַיֹּאמֶר הַרְאֵנִי נָא אֶת־כְּבֹדֶךָ:), to which God says a cordial "nope": וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא תוּכַל לְרְאֹת אֶת־פָּנָי כִּי לֹא־יִרְאַנִי הָאָדָם וָחָי:, "You cannot see My face, for no man may see My face and live" (Exodus 33:20). So we've got Moses' request to see God's *kavod* and God's answer that Moses cannot see God's "*face.*" What precisely are we talking about that Moses cannot see? The issue is especially perplexing given that Moses just a few sentences earlier asks "Show me now your *ways*, that I may know you" וְעַתָּה אִם־נָא מָצָאתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ הוֹדִעֵנִי נָא אֶת־דְּרָכֶךָ וְאֵדָעֲךָ (Exodus 33:13, ), to which God says, "no problem": וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנִי אַעֲבִיר כָּל־טוּבִי עַל־פָּנֶיךָ, "I will make all My goodness pass before thee" (Exodus 33:19). This time we have God's *ways* and God's *goodness*.

So far, *face* and *kavod* cannot be seen while *ways* and *goodness* can be seen. So what I want to know—and the title of this drash--is: *What Doesn't Moses See When Moses Doesn't See It.* Who said studying Torah isn't as much fun as Dr. Seuss rhymes.

In pursuing an answer, I'm going to draw upon the Rambam, Maimonides. As I do, I'm aware that Maimonides is part of an implicit conversation in the minyan. In a recent drash, for instance, David Kraemer mentioned the Maimonidean God as his kind of God: a God that is the ground for all existence--an abstract, de-anthropomorphized conception of the transcendent. In contrast to this abstraction, Ruby Namdar is all materiality all the way down. Whenever he gives one of his wonderful drashes on sacrifice, I think: *Korbanot: The Movie*. Or… *Zvachim*—now streaming on Hulu and Apple Plus. It's vivid.

I'm on the Maimonidean, abstract end of the conversation, and I'd like to explore "*kavod*," "face," "ways," and "goodness" through a Maimonidean lens as I hold that *theological abstraction is one of the great gifts of Judaism to humanity.*

Let's begin with a small question: what is God? – and then maybe we can figure out what about God Moses doesn't see. On Maimonides's view, following Aristotle and the medieval philosophers Alfarabi and ibn Sina, God is not only one, as in the *shema*. God is also a unique, infinite, immaterial, simple, unitary (no parts, indivisible) necessity. Necessity means that you can have only God and nothing else, but if there is *anything* else, there must be God as God is the necessary ground of all existence. God is the answer to the question: why is there something rather than nothing? Whatever the answer is, that's the Maimonidean God.

But God is also *unitary,* as Maimonides writes in the *Guide for the Perplexed,* "one simple essence in which there is no complexity or multiplicity of notions, but one notion only… not divided in any way" (*Guide* 1.51, Pines 113[1]). So why do we have so many names for God?: Elohim, Adonai, El Shaddai, YHVH, etc. a *pantheon* of names for a unitary, *mono*theistic God. And why do we have terms like "*kavod,"* "face," and "ways" in our *parasha?*

On Maimonides's view, the plurality of names and attributes—merciful, gracious, etc.--emerges from the *human* effort to describe a radically other transcendent, out of time, space, and materiality. A God about whom we can have no scientific, demonstrated proof—no *propter quid* proof, where the explanation for the effect is contained in the cause. God is uncaused, so we

[1] All English translations are taken from, Maimonides, Moses (1963) *Guide to the Perplexed* (trans. Shlomo Pines), Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

cannot have scientific knowledge of what causes God because there is no cause. *Scientific proofs* are not how we know God exists. We can describe God only indirectly, based on the indirect information we get about God from the world. The world is the outcome of God's actions, and we can learn something of God by studying those outcomes in world—God's *ways* in the world. So here we have what "ways" in our *parasha* means.

Maimonides has a parable for this: we know a city has an effective king indirectly, by observing its orderly living conditions, the result of the king's policies in the city. So too we know of God by observing God's ways in the world. Our descriptions don't tell us what the king or God is. They tell us what we, using our sensory apparatus and experience, understand about God based on our understanding of the way the world works. Humanity, one commentator succinctly notes, may describe God's actions but not the actor.[2]

For instance, Maimonides says, when we say God is merciful, what's meant is nothing about God but rather that God grants worldly things an existence that they aren't "owed" on the merits (*Guide* 1.54, Pines 124). In human-talk, we call "merciful" God's *action* or way of granting existence to world (see also, *Guide* 1:57, Pines 133). Similarly, when humanity observes violence, we say God is "angry." But this is our projection from our human experience onto God. It says nothing about God's Godself so to speak. As one commentator notes, "A literal belief in God's anger is itself a cardinal falsehood that Maimonides attempts to correct… It served as a politically necessary belief designed to ensure obedience to the Law"[3] by the uneducated masses.

While Maimonides understood the human need to use our experience to describe an imperceptible divine, he strove throughout his life to wean us from doing so. God for Maimonides is one, unitary, infinite, and immaterial. No human emotions, attitudes, or body parts. So out-of-court are anthropomorphisms that the *Mishneh Torah* declares them heretical, preventing a place in the world to come. The *Guide (*1.36, Pines 84) calls them worse than idolatry. Anthropomorphizers, Maimonides write, "are a hater, an enemy, and an adversary of God, much more so than an idolater." – Yeah, right, but what did he really think about them…

So for those of you who have affection for *b'yad hazakah u'zroah netu'ya*, with a strong hand and outstretched arm, God took us from Egypt… Maimonides says: lose it, the whole body thing. So too with God's seeing, speaking, ascending, descending, dwelling, and all manner of emotions. These have meaning—but metaphorically. As one commentator somewhat wryly notes, "Maimonides does not much care which meaning the reader chooses—so long as he does not take the term in its corporeal meaning in application to God."[4]

So in our *parashah*: If God is unitary, infinite, and incorporeal, what are terms like *kavod* and "face"? If they're not a *part* of a God that has no parts (God is unitary), what are they? Maimonides says: they are not substances as some kabbalists imagined. Notions of God coming into world (theophanies) that propose a divine *substance* risk creating idols—a point well taken in a *parashah* with the Golden Calf.

So *kavod* and "face' are not substances that can be seen. Maimonides, in *Guide* 1.4 (Pines 27-28) insists: "Every mention of seeing, when referring to God, may He be exalted, has . . . figurative meaning—as when Scripture says: . . . 'Oh, let me see Your kavod!' [that's "our"]

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[2] Seeskin, Kenneth (2005) "Metaphysics and Its Transcendent," in *The Cambridge Companion to Maimonides*, Kenneth Seeskin (ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Kindle Locations 2271-2733, quote at 2373.
[3] Kreisel, Howard (19990. *Maimonides' Political Thought: Studies in Ethics, Law, and the Human ideal,* Albany: State University of New York Press, 48.
[4] Stern, Josef (2013) *The Matter and Form of Maimonides' Guide*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 24.

Exod. 33: 18 . . . All this refers to intellectual apprehension and in no way to the eye's seeing." Maimonides is saying that since God has no materiality or body parts, there is nothing to see. Whatever Moses does or doesn't "see" in Exodus 33 is not an image resulting from retinal-brain activity. It is rather an "intellectual apprehension," something like apprehending a mediated flash of the divine essence (whatever that is)--or of the Separate Intellects that Maimonides took from Aristotle, the living intellect-spheres of the heavens that emerge from God's *shefa*, overflow. If you're not sure that that is--no worries. Maimonides says we can't know what they are anyway as the human senses can't detect them (Guide 1.59, 1.64).

Bottom line: on Maimonides's view, "*kavod*" and "face" are not part of a God that has no parts; they are not substances and so they cannot be seen by us humans. A strong statement of this anti-anthropomorphism is found in Maimonides's discussion of Ezekiel (*Guide* 3.7, Pines 430). He writes, "Now the kavod of the Lord is not the Lord, as we have made clear several times. Accordingly, everything to which the parables contained in Ezekiel's apprehensions refer is only the kavod of the Lord, I mean to say the chariot, not the Rider, as He, [God] May He be exalted, may not be presented in a likeness in a parable. Understand this." In short, *kavod* says nothing about God though we humans metaphorically use the word for something like divine majesty or gravitas, linked to the Hebrew root *kuf, bet, daled*, meaning "heavy."

So God is a radically other, unitary, unknowable transcendent, and *kavod* and anthropomorphisms like "face" are "human talk," our attempts to describe an imperceptible divine. Imperceptible, that is, as long as we are *H. sapiens*. They are beyond our perceptual apparatus, like those dog whistles which we cannot hear (except maybe politically). In fact, anyone who saw God's "face" could not be living as a human being with human biology and senses.

*This* is what Exodus 33 says. When God says, "no man may see My face and live," God isn't threatening Moses with death. God is explaining the set-up of the world. There is nothing in human capacity that can register God's essence. That's just nature. *Kavod* and "face" are "human talk" for what cannot be perceived by human perceptual capacity. They may be, on Maimonides's view, metaphors for flashes intellectual and spiritual apprehension of a God we cannot know directly.

What Moses *can* know is God's ways—the outcomes of God's actions in world—and the related term כָּל-טוּבִי, all God's "goodness." Maimonides explains "goodness" as all God's creation, as it says in Genesis "And God saw everything that He had made, and, behold, it was very good." So God's "goodness" is the created world. "I mean," Maimonides continues, "that he [Moses] will apprehend their [laws of] nature and the way they are mutually connected so that he will know how He [God] governs them ..." (*Guide* 1.54, Pines 124). Moses will come to understand how the laws of nature work. Though Moses cannot "see" God's "face" or *kavod* (as there is nothing humans can see), Moses *can* see the effects of God in world, the way God's created nature works.

Moses can see what *remains* in world, the laws of nature, *after* God's act of creation. Maimonides describes this as like seeing someone after she has left the room. Maimonides writes, it is "in the same way as an individual, whose back is seen (*Mishneh Torah*, "Laws of the Foundations of the Torah," 1: 10). This is what's meant in saying that Moses can see God's *back*. Moses can see and understand God's created world.

Indeed, one commentator holds that on Maimonides's view, Moses' *purpose* in asking to see "God's ways"--the outcomes of God's act of creation, or nature--was for guidance in governing the Israelites. If you know how things works—God's ways, the laws of nature--it's

easier to productively organize daily living. "Moses' goal was to imitate the actions whereby God governed man... Moses' political governance of Israel was an imitation of the divine cosmic governance of mankind."[5] Indeed, this is a theme of Maimonides's work: humanity's capacity to glean God's ways from the study of nature and to strive to behave commensurately.

To sum up, Moses, like all humans, cannot see God's "face" or *kavod*—human metaphors for God's essence--as there is nothing that the human senses can detect and no scientific knowledge to be had about God. The scientific method cannot tell us about God and it is not how we know God. However, Moses, like all humans, can know the outcomes of God's actions in world, אֶת־דְּרָכֶיךָ and God's goodness in creating a world that need not have existed at all. And we can try to act with similar grace.

This is the human task. Acting, in the human realm, with commensurate grace and generosity is our learning curve on Earth. Maimonides ends the *Guide not* with ruminations on philosophy but with a passage in Jeremiah 9:22-23. It is a mandate to kindness, justice, and equity (חֶסֶד מִשְׁפָּט וּצְדָקָה)—to act, as much as humanly possible, with divine compassion and generosity.

It has been said that the Maimonidean God is too abstract, and that the confetti of anthropomorphisms in post-Maimonidean kabbalah was a response to the *distance and inaccessibility* of Maimonides's God. To the contrary, I find this radically other God greatly comforting. Anything else—anything other than a unitary, infinite, immaterial otherness, any s*ubstance*, no matter how grand--would not suffice to ground the universe. Any substance cannot itself be the ground of all substances. God as a substance is not *substantive* enough to hold the world's messiness, with all its brilliance and horror.

I hope there is a portal for all of you to such comfort in this drash on this shabbat, which is after all a day of *menuchah*, rest and comfort.

Coda—I got the idea for a code from Billy Meyers: It may be true that Moses and we cannot "see" God. But I just want to say that when I say, I'll see you at kiddush, I mean retinal-brain activity and oral-brain activity in the consumption of *real*, *material* scotch. Shabbat shalom!

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[5] Kaplan, Lawrence (2005) "Maimonides and Soloveitchik on the Knowledge and Imitation of God," in *Moses Maimonides (1138-1204): His Religious, Scientific, and Philosophical Wirkungsgeschichte in Different Cultural Contexts* (Gorge K. Hasselhoff and Otfried Fraisse, eds.), Baden-Baden: Ergon Verlag, 499-500.

Vayakhel-Pekudei - March 18, 2023

On January 21st many of us were privileged to be present at a celebration of the life of Yocheved Muffs on the occasion of her first yahrtzeit. At that time Iyov Jindo, Yochanan's last PhD student, sang the *Gondola no Uta* song in Japanese in acknowledgment of Yo's well-lived life and in remembrance of Yochanan insisting Iyov study the films of Akira Kurosawa with him alongside their formal work. The *Gondola no Uta* is the theme from Kurosawa's *Ikiru* from 1956, the title of which means 'to live.' The ballad was written in 1915 and remained popular in Japan. This is what Iyov sang here:

*life is brief*
*fall in love, maidens*
*before the boat drifts away*
*on the waves*
*before the hand resting on your shoulder*
*becomes frail*
*for those who will know no tomorrow*

*life is brief*
*fall in love, maidens*
*before the raven tresses*
*begin to fade*
*before the flame in your hearts*
*flicker and die*
*for today, once passed,*
*is never to come again*

Kazuo Ishiguro, the 2017 Nobel laureate for Literature, who wrote the screenplay adaptation of *Ikiru* for the current film *Living*, has been obsessed with Kurosawa's film since the age of twelve. He has said *Ikiru* contributed to his writing of *The Remains of the Day*, which is about a butler who has squandered his life on mistaken loyalties. Ishiguro was preoccupied with how to imbue the remains of a life with meaning.

*Ikiru* opens with a contrast X-ray of a stomach with a large, cancerous, fatal growth. The life of the owner of the X-ray, Kanji Watanabe, the robotic, detached bureaucrat called The Zombie is described by the utterly reliable narrator. For the

last thirty years he has been "busy, busy doing nothing at all" as the director of his municipal department. A group of working-class mothers has been coming to City Hall in an attempt to have the city convert a cesspool swamp into a playground for their children. However, they keep getting shunted fruitlessly from one department to another, including by Watanabe. The widower Watanabe knows he is dying but his son and daughter-in-law are utterly indifferent to him. After considering overdosing, he finds a stranger at a bar willing to listen as he says, "I can't bring myself to make it final-but what was I living for all these years? I'm so mad at myself." At a nightclub, he sings the *Gondola no Uta* in a guttural, haunted voice which causes others to back away. He realizes he has not bothered to look at a sunset in thirty years. "I writhe and thrash around but I have nothing to hold onto." "I want to be alive even for one day; I want to do something but I don't know what." Once he formulates his dilemma clearly, he throws himself into getting the playground project through the immovable bureaucracy, saying "I can't afford to hate people; I haven't got that kind of time." The women care for Watanabe and Watanabe builds for them. He sees the sunset is "truly beautiful," and then dies on the playground swing he built, as he contentedly sings the *Gondola no Uta.*

Since our parsha, Vayakhel-Pekudei, has given us a double-feature, so we must have a double-feature of films from Kurosawa. Perhaps his most famous film is *Rashomon* made in 1951, which was drawn from Ryunosuke Akutagawa's short stories *Rashomon* and *In a Grove*. Kyoto was the capital of Japan from 794 until 1869. The Rajomon Gate was the magnificent main entry to Kyoto until it was destroyed by a storm and never fully restored. By the early 11th century, in which these stories are set, a time of pestilence and civil war, it was a ruin and it had become a place to dispose of corpses and unwanted children. Kurosawa uses *Rashomon* mainly as a frame under which a Buddhist priest, a wood cutter and a peasant take refuge from the pelting rain in order to tell the story of *In a Grove*. Kurosawa hews closely to Akutagawa's tale of the rape of a noble woman, the death of her samurai husband and the capture of an infamous bandit in a Dantean deep woods three days earlier. The thief, the woman and the spirit of the samurai reached through a medium, in multiple, non-linear flashbacks, each narrate unreliable, incompatible accounts of what occurred.

The first words heard in the film are those of the wood cutter, "I don't understand. I just don't understand." The short story *Rashomon* seeks to demonstrate the operations of subjectivity, contingency and indeterminacy. It is the short story that can be said to have defined the famous Rashomon Effect,

thought of in an academic context as "the naming of an epistemological framework-or ways of thinking, knowing and remembering-required for understanding complex and ambiguous situations," but it was the film which made the content of the short story widely known.

After faithfully recording the short story, the humanist Kurosawa then changes direction and introduces a totally new character, a baby abandoned in the Rashomon. After the peasant steals the clothing swaddling the crying baby, the wood cutter tells the priest "I have six kids; another won't make a difference," as he goes off with the child. The wood cutter cannot understand what has happened, but he knows what needs to be done. The priest feels saved from despair knowing the wood cutter's act makes all the difference in the world.

Kurosawa felt the moral urgency of social recovery in a ruined Japan after WW II, especially given human duplicity and vanity Ironically, his film *Rashomon* is actually the antidote to the Rashomon Effect in that he cuts the Gordian knot of intellectual arguments and philosophical contortions by reminding us the baby must be saved. Akutagawa ends his *Rashomon* with: "Beyond this was only darkness…unknowing and unknown." Kurosawa will not allow this to be the final statement.

I had to walk many miles in Kyoto to discover this. What you are seeing here is a concrete marker indicating the former site of the Rajomon Gate, confined by an iron railing and surrounded by the expanse of a children's playground. It is as if Kurosawa personally designed a visual metaphor of how life is to be lived. Intellection cannot be its own justification and cannot survive on its own. It is an island in a vaster sea of purpose, caring, decency and connection which ensures we don't lose our way. As Rav Soloveitchik said regarding the repair of a fraying life, "…remorse comes as a result of emotion, not from reasoning; a person's intellect plays a negligible part in it."

Our understanding is limited. The Ryoanji Zen rock garden in Kyoto has 15 stones in it, which remain just as placed by a monk 500 years ago. They are positioned so that no matter how frantically one runs back and forth and jumps up and down, it simply is not possible to see all the stones at one time. To move to reveal one stone is to lose sight of some other stone. We can strive to be a still center but we cannot even encompass the deep vast of our individual worlds. What abides, even in the unredacted version of our lives, is the truth of what Darwin wrote to his friend and defender Joseph Hooker, "Talk of fame, honor, pleasure,

wealth, all are dirt compared with affection." When Dina introduced me to Havurah Judaism nearly half a century ago, I had never experienced anything like her or it before, and so I decided to stay with both.

Vayakhel-Pekudei is the only parsha which begins with the "convoking of the whole Israelite community," and a reference to the "whole community" appears twice more, while the words "all," "everyone," and "every" are frequently employed throughout. As in any community, the work of particularly tireless individuals, here Bezalel and Oholiav, are acknowledged before the Torah returns to the beauty all had created. The Mishkan is erected on the first day of the first month, the anniversary of which is this coming Thursday. God's spirit invests what all had built and it remained "in the view of all the house of Israel throughout their journey," which was the rest of their lives.

Dovid has done massive work assembling a record of nearly 45 years of sustained caring and building on the parts of all the members of this religious community, which kept the writhing and thrashing with nothing to hold onto at bay. We are not, and have never been, merely a davening group but have always been a community. That is why we are still here while so many other groups of the past are no longer. We have always been the best version of ourselves when together.

And so, you understand that I speak to you today in the special way of a darshan, and not as a lecturer, and I know you hear me today in the special way of a kahal, and not as an audience. As the Mishkan was constructed plank by plank and ring by ring, so this community was constructed Shabbos by Shabbos, simcha by simcha, shiva by shiva, presence always by presence, in view of all the house of M'at. This is not Minyan Meta; this is the intimate sanctuary.

Boruch and Yo and Howie remain bound up with M'at. Some find it troubling to be told that the minyan, like a life, is on a trajectory towards an eventual end. Can it really be that someone would find the prospect that we will see each other through to that end as depressing?!!? Scholars tell us the structure and contents of the book of Devarim evolved over time, but in all versions, Moshe always died in the end and God buried him. Nearly forty years ago, I concluded a dvar Torah saying, with full confidence: "It gives me great comfort, in the present, to know that when my time comes, the minyan will take care of my bones." It takes a long time to realize that actually, nothing in this world is ever done alone.

From Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*:

"God made mud.
God got lonesome.
So God said to some of the mud, "Sit up!"
"See all I've made," said God, "the hills, the sea, the sky, the stars."
And I was some of the mud that got to sit up and look around.
Lucky me, lucky mud.
I, mud, sat up and saw what a nice job God had done.
Nice going, God.
Nobody but you could have done it, God! I certainly couldn't have.
I feel very unimportant compared to You.
The only way I can feel the least bit important is to think of all the mud that didn't even get to sit up and look around.
I got so much, and most mud got so little.
Thank you for the honor!
[Eventually] mud lies down again and goes to sleep.
What memories for mud to have!
What interesting other kinds of sitting-up mud I met!
I loved everything I saw!

In this entropic world, you were the antidote, you were the best mud I could have spent the last 45 years with. In the maftir we read "This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months…," that is, of all our months which remain to us. We are ending one book, and begin another.

I say to you now, as Philip Roth on the occasion of his birthday celebration in 2008 was moved to say, "75…how sudden."

Howard L. Berkowitz

Vayakhel - Pekude

Twenty years ago, I gave a drash on parshe Terumah in which I could not find a way to come to terms with the density of the text. I ducked it and talked about other things, and now, in a kind of return of the repressed, I've drawn Terumah's not-quite-mirror image, parshe Vayakhel. Which requires that I think about them as a pair: why should the Torah have produced such a spectrum-y, OCD passage as Terumah and, even stranger, why repeat all those obsessive details almost verbatim in Vayakhel?

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To attempt an answer, I'm going to have to go back to parshe Yitro and the big Ten Commandments scene. But, first, an odd thought. The giving of Torah, *natan Torah*, may be, to us, the most important event in the whole Pentateuch, but the Torah itself doesn't seem to know that. Throughout the book of Exodus, God promises the Israelites many things: that he will take us out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage; that we will go with gold and silver; that he will lead us to a land of milk and honey, scattering our enemies. But nowhere does he say, I will take you up on a mountain and give you the law. At one point (iii:12) he says we will become "servants of God" on a mountain, but nothing about tablets or law or the Word of God. Why not? Was the law not envisioned and planned, but improvised on the spot?

In Yitro, just before the advent of the deity, Moses is running up and down the mountain making sure the people are all washed and sanctified and warned to keep their distance. Then come the thunderbolts, the lightning, the cloud descending, the long, drawn out shofar blast. 600,000 people are down at the base of the mountain, terrified and trembling. Sinai is covered in smoke because God Almighty, creator of the Universe, is descending on it in fire. The entire mountain is shaking violently as if physical reality itself could shatter into pieces right here.

And in the midst of that chaos comes what seems to me one of the sublime lines in sefer Shemot; it's really only half a line: *Vaykira haShem l'Moshe el rosh ha-har, v'ya-al Moshe.* "And God called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up." The shock and awe collapse into this simple statement of command and obedience, of approaching oneness in which Moses, we presume, is going up to receive whatever it is God has come to bring.

But that's not what happens. The moment Moses gets up there, God sends him back down to warn the people not to break through the barrier and touch the mountain, lest they die. In fact, the people are not exactly storming the barriers; they're panicked out of their minds and are trying to get as far away from the Divinity as possible. And, as we've said, God has already issued this warning, just nine verses back. So why is He suddenly, and at the last minute, repeating himself? Which is just what Moses is wondering as he says, with a hint of exasperation: "You already said this. 'Set barriers around the

mountain and sanctify it.' Why are you telling us again?" Are we allowed to say that God seems slightly hysterical here? And that Moses is understandably rattled by that? Even apart from all the fire and smoke, this is a fraught and disturbing scene. It's like one of those horrible family blow-ups with everyone screaming. And Moshe, like the gifted child or the peace-making mom, swallows his own distress and goes down the mountain to deliver a second warning. Upon which God proclaims the Ten Commandments.

Let's turn from the Commandments, which we know, and observe the people receiving them. What do they hear? They hear nothing. *V'cal ha-am* ***ree-im*** *et ha-kolot*. "And the people *saw* the voices and the flames and the call of the shofar and the mountain smoking. The people saw and trembled and stood far off."

The people cannot hear God. It isn't an auditory problem. It's not that God isn't speaking loudly and clearly. Or that the people have wax in their ears, like Odysseus's men. They don't want to hear him, and they won't. They are overwhelmed; their minds stop processing sound.

We are so used to this famous passage and so cut off from the divine ourselves that it's hard to imagine – even to *try* to imagine, what theophany, the appearance of God, must have been like. The mountain shaking, the horns blasting… All our metaphors from madness to nuclear destruction feel inadequate. Maybe what I've called God's hysteria is the Torah's attempt to convey how disturbing and impossible things felt. It is not simply

that God might shatter the world. It is that the God they are meeting here for the first time is Himself a shattering. Shattering, it turns out, is the fundamental reality. However oppressive slavery in Egypt might have been, it made you miserable, not insane. And the people want nothing more than to get away from this insanity.

So, they tell Moses: "You talk to God. Tell us what he says. We'll stay over here." Moses tries to reassure them, but they want none of it and none of Him. They reject Him. They refuse Him. And since the metaphor of a marriage between God and the Jewish people is such a familiar one, let's say that what happens in chapters 19 and 20, the big scene on the mountain, is a wedding night, one that does not go well. To put it bluntly, the bride freaks. (And I'm happy to stipulate that those freaking loudest were, of course, the males.) This is unfortunate, but not irreparable. After all, it was an arranged marriage. The bride had never met the groom before, so when He appeared to her in his full magnificence, she panicked and withdrew. Maybe He was too much for her, all at once like that. The groom gets it. He is not insensitive.

So, He repairs with his chief counselor, the intermediary to his bride, to what Hirsch calls an "opaque darkness." Here they will discuss in private what has happened and what is to be done. HaShem recognizes that the *gamos* he envisioned, the ecstatic honeymoon where the lovers abandon themselves to each other without restraint, that's not happening, at least not now. Even so, relations have to be established and the marriage consummated. (There is more at stake here than joy.) If the bride has trouble with a direct encounter, more formal arrangements can be made.

God understands now that he cannot approach the people directly. The matriarchs and patriarchs of Genesis who could laugh and scheme with Him, argue and even sort of wrestle, that world is gone. Regrettable, perhaps, but God has known disappointments before this. He has seen Adam and Eve fall; he has destroyed the world in a Flood that failed to purify it; now, this too is not coming out as planned. Let us not ignore His deep and great sadness, even as He is so much more than that sadness. (As the poet says, "For nothing can be sole or whole that has not been rent.")

So, inside that opaque darkness, God lays out a new regime to accommodate his skittish bride. Graven images will be forbidden. He said that already, of course, back when they weren't listening, but maybe it means something different here: no image of God Himself, lest it terrify the bride. (Just as Psyche was supposed to keep the lights off so she wouldn't see Eros.) There will be an altar and a system of sacrifices, a carefully regulated structure for the encounters between groom and bride. The bride is given many things to do – to keep her busy, happy, and, yes, obedient. There will be rules about how the altar can be made and how it can be approached. God doesn't need these rules; the people need them. They are meant to comfort the bride, distract her from her fear, assure her that relations with the terrible and awesome groom are…under control.

Is this why the Law comes into being, because the people cannot endure the chaos of direct theophany? A real encounter. Is it an accommodation to our terror? Our

smallness. Is it possible that Jesus of Nazareth was an attempt to…? But let's save that for another time.

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Terumah, then, is part of this system of accommodation. It lays out in remarkable and maddening and, maybe, reassuring detail the proposed construction of a place where encounters between bride and groom will occur. No, not all over the mountain, or by the well, or at the pillar of stones or at a bush burning in a field, but just here in the Tabernacle, the dwelling place. This is where they will meet. Later, it will be specified exactly what they will do when they meet. Down to the last detail. (See Ruby's novel for more.) And maybe it is at this moment that we realize how pagan the Torah has been up to now, and how un-pagan it will be henceforth.

Which is to say that Terumah is not an instruction manual nor a symbolic representation of the Universe or of the Human Soul – or at least not merely those things. It is, also, a proposal to an unhappy and traumatized bride for how the couple might manage its difficult and potentially explosive relationship. And – this is important -- it is exploratory, an offering, written in the future tense, the final form to be revealed later "on the mountain". What seem to us the endless, obsessive details are part of that reassurance. They say: I've thought this all out. Just follow it step by step. You'll be fine.

There is a screenwriting trick I want to invoke here. It says that if an audience feels sufficiently informed about something, it will, under certain circumstances, accept that

other characters in the movie know it, too, even if it hasn't seen them learn it. I want to argue that the people, *ha-am*, are privy to all the details of Terumah – even though it's being spoken to Moses alone in that opaque darkness. Let us proceed as if they know what God's proposing and why; it's an offer made to them. I can live without this trick, but it's a better story with it.

It's a better because when, in parshe Ki Tissa, the people betray haShem with a different god of their own devising, when they are unfaithful to him, take another lover, (and the rabbis use exactly this language), it is more poignant and painful if they know the lengths to which haShem has gone to please and comfort them. A misunderstanding is not as powerful or useful to my drash as a knowing rejection of God's love.

The knowing rejection of the thoughtful offer makes God's fury easier to understand. Like any jealous husband, he is ready to kill them all. Like only God Himself, he is ready to abrogate his promise to those Genesis figures he knew and loved so well and start all over again with Moses. Moses talks him out of it, but not without the requisite slaughter: 3000 by the Levite sword, an unspecified additional number through a plague.

Once again, the people feel His madness, the unpredictable violence, the shattering terror. And this time it has, somehow, the opposite effect. Instead of running away from him, instead of being relieved that he's leaving them alone, they're bereft. Maybe the lethal violence has a calming effect, exactly opposite to the chaotic violence of God's original appearance. After all, a God who kills his enemies and betrayers is a God they can

fathom and respect and, thus, love. Or maybe it is simply that they are getting used to Him; just as we often find that what originally horrified and repelled us, later draws us to it and becomes irresistible.

But this is a real love story, because now that they want Him, He doesn't want them. He's going to let them go on without Him, lest He lose His temper again and destroy them utterly. As He makes clear, they could never feel entirely safe. Because "I will favor whomever I will favor." And perhaps not even He is sure who that will be. The people immerse themselves in mourning, remove their ornaments. The marriage is done. Girl loses boy.

So how will the couple find its way back to each other, the end both want, but neither can engineer alone? He has to get over His wounded pride and fury. She has to atone for her fickleness, even as she knows she will be fickle again. (She, too, will favor whom she will favor.) The rapprochement is orchestrated, of course, by that intermediary we call Moshe Rabenu. And it happens in two scenes of such surpassing beauty and tenderness that I have to describe them.

In the first, let's call it the Seduction, Moses pitches the Tent of the Appointed Meeting outside the camp, and, over what feels like a period of days, the people watch him go inside, while each day the pillar of cloud descends. Everybody wonders: Is Moses going to work it out for us? Is he going to fix things with haShem? Finally we cut inside the tent where Moses is – a little disingenuously, I think – telling God, "Listen, I know you

told me to lead the people on," i.e. without you, "but I don't know quite what you mean, lead where, lead how, so explain yourself to me…" (and I here I want to give it in Hirsch's translation) "…help me, I pray, to recognize the unity in the diversity of thy ways, so that I may know thee…." He doesn't say, "You're an erratic, terrifying, madman…" He says, "Tell me about yourself." And God's response? Does He say, "Okay, I'll explain…"? No. He says, "I'll go with you after all." Why? Because you persuaded Me with your logic? No, because you love Me. How do I know you love Me? Because you want to know Me. You want to know the unity in the diversity of My ways. Who can resist that?

The second scene takes place back up on the mountain. Let's call it the Aftermath and say that it occurs after whatever happened following the Seduction: Moses hews the second set of tablets and goes up the mountain as instructed. God descends in a cloud, places himself beside Moses and proclaims, "*Adonoi, Adonoi, el rachum v'chanun...etc.*" The prayer we know so well. I had to read this passage about sixteen times before I could accept that it wasn't the people singing about God, or Moses singing, that this was God singing about Himself. You want to know the diversity of my ways, let's start with these. This feels to me like God's overflowing happiness at being known. God glorying in God. Frankly, it reminds me a little of Peter Pan crowing with self-delight. And that is not an apostasy. It is just one thread in the diversity of His ways.

Which brings us at last to parshe Vayakhel. (The actual building of the Mishkon.)

All that was promised in Terumah is fulfilled in Vayakhel. What was rejected by the community when they gave their jewelry for the making of the egal is accepted by them when they give their jewelry for making of the Mishkon. The future that had been canceled when God abandoned the covenant – is restored now that he has renewed it. The people who were rebellious are now obedient, and their obedience is expressed in every beam and hoop and thread and socket. But more than obedience.

*B'tzalayl himself made the Ark of shittim wood*... Hirsch adds the word 'himself,'(it's not in the Torah) and it feels right. Back in Terumah it was simply *They shall make an ark*... Here it's a specific person, one into whom God had put wisdom, and who now puts that wisdom, his own wisdom, into the ark. The idea has become a reality, and all that was tedious and abstract and provisional in Terumah is now immediate and concrete and, it seems to me, urgent. The almost identical sentences that one had to wade through the first time now rush past. Terumah was a plan. Vayakhel is an act. An act of love. The bride is building the house the groom commanded. The bride is obedient, yet creative. Her "sin" with the egal has bought her something precious and important: her obedience is now freely given. Having refused Him once, having turned away, the turning back is her choice. There is a mad, almost ecstatic impulse in every detail, every piece of wood, metal and fabric. It is a kind of divine frenzy. We have seen a seduction and an aftermath. Here is a consummation: [Read silently, the passage that follows loses, it seems to me, its force and meaning. It needs to be read aloud, as if it were poetry, to feel what is really happening here]

*They made the bells of pure gold and placed the bells between the pomegranates, round about between the pomegranates, upon the bottom hems of the robe. A bell and a pomegranate, a bell and a pomegranate each upon the bottom hems of the robe round about, for performing the service, as God had commanded Moshe. They made the tunics of byssus of woven work for Aaron and his sons. The turban of byssus and the ornament of the high turbans of byssus, and the linen breeches of byssus twisted into six-ply thread. The sash of byssus twisted into six-ply thread... They made the diadem of the Sanctuary and placed upon it a thread of sky-blue wool, to go over the turban from above, as God had commanded Moshe. All the work to be accomplished for the Dwelling Place of the Tent of Appointed Meeting was completed; the sons Yisrael had done it; entirely as commanded Moshe, so they did... Moshe saw the entire work and lo! they had accomplished it. As God had commanded, so they had done, and Moshe blessed them.*

Shabbat Shalom.

Vayakhel-Pekudei

10th anniversary of the aufruf of Bali Miller and Stuart Klawans

Shabbat shalom. Or gut shabbes, as the case may be.

Ten years ago today, when we were still davvening on the sixth floor, Michael Paley gave the drash on Vayakhel-Pekudei and remarked that it is not his favorite parsha. I suspected this was a rhetorical ploy, rather than a confession. But, even so, the fact that Michael would make this claim struck me as so extraordinary that I have literally spent the past decade mulling it over.

The problem, for me, is one of literary form. Sh'mot is the book in which we grow from a collection of tribes into a people. It's the book of liberation, of revelation, of covenant, of the creation of holy space here on earth. I had to wonder: Would such a book conclude with a parsha that falls flat? Vayikra, sure. But Sh'mot? It didn't seem possible.

So I thought about the people who do feel a special attraction to Vayakhel-Pekudei. First of all, Jewish fundraisers. This is definitely their favorite parsha.

Next, the architects. I happen to have done some work with Santiago Calatrava, and I can tell you, he loves this parsha. God, the ultimate client, actually calls the architect *by name.*

And Vayakehl-Pekudei is one of my favorite parshas—because ten years ago today, Bali and I celebrated our aufruf in front of this minyan, and I stood next to her as she leyned the maftir.

So, I admit my prejudice. But even so, I think Vayakhel-Pekudei brings the book of Sh'mot to a magnificent climax. I want to tell you why I think that's so. And I also want to tell you how ten years of marriage have reinforced that opinion.

What has happened during these ten years? For one thing, I have become involved with a body of literature that I previously knew only superficially—a literature that is peculiarly relevant to the parsha before us. I'm going to draw my proof text today from this body of work—choosing, as my example, the book of *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel.*

At the very beginning of the text, Mike Mulligan says, "Hinei! Mary Anne, the beautiful red steam shovel, can dig as much in a day as a hundred men can dig in a week." This is Mike Mulligan's declaration of faith. And faith has to be tested. So he and Mary Anne go out from the city of their oppression, into the wilderness of Poppervillc. And there Mike Mulligan repeats his declaration: "Mary Anne can dig as much in a day as a hundred men can dig in a week." Then Mary Anne makes good on Mikc's words, in the eyes of all the people.

The text devotes 12 p'sukim to her digging of the first corner of the test area, neat and square, while the sun rises.

Nine p'sukim are devoted to the digging of the second corner, neat and square, as the sun reaches its zenith.

Five p'sukim are devoted to the digging of the third corner, neat and square, as the sun goes down.

And 12 p'sukim, balancing the original 12, are devoted to the completion of the fourth corner, neat and square, just as the sun sets.

Mary Anne has dug as much in a day as a hundred men could dig in a week.

Now, what do we learn from this tale, and from countless children's stories like it? We learn there's a deep satisfaction to be gained from hearing a prediction, and then hearing how that prediction is fulfilled, step by step, detail by detail. Have you ever known a child to be bored with these repetitions? Of course not. The repetitions are the whole point.

Let me turn, just for a minute, to another text, which I think helps explain this satisfaction. It's a little book by J.L. Austin, titled *How to Do Things With Words*.

In this book, Austin sets out a theory of performative language. For example: Under the right circumstances, if you say, "I now pronounce you husband and wife," two people will become husband and wife. The words perform the deed. In children's books, I think, we get very close to performative language. These trustworthy, repetitive rhythms reassure the listener that the necessary outcome is being fulfilled. The words seem to accomplish the task.

And so it is with Vayakhel-Pekudei. The prediction, the act that must be fulfilled, has already been declared in Terumah and Tetzaveh, in full detail. Here's what you will do to make the mishkan, and furnish it, and dress the kohanim. Then comes the break—because there always has to be a break of some kind—in Ki Tisa, with the catastrophe of the golden calf. And then, in Vayakhel-Pekudei, we hear the unfurling of this long sequence of repetitive cadences, telling us that yes, each act that had to be done was in fact performed.

So that you won't think I'm relying too much on *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel,* or on the philosophy of J.L. Austin, I will point out that the rabbis had their own

theory of performative language. As we all know, they proposed that the recitation of prayers could serve as a re-enactment of the Temple sacrifices. I think it's too weak to call the prayers a substitute for the sacrifices. Rather, the prayers, the words we recite, effectively perform the sacrifice.

Now we, as adults, are not as profound as children. We're easily distracted and have our heads full of folly. And, as modern grown-ups, we are trained to read impatiently. But, you know, we're not commanded to read the Torah. We're commanded to hear it. And if we hear the repetitions of Vayakhel-Pekudei, if we really listen to them, then I think the words do something for us.

That's one thing that marriage has taught me about this parsha. But marriage has also taught me a second thing, which is not about the form of the repetitions but about their meaning.

If you ask someone to marry you, and you're not a complete imbecile, you will do it because you have come to some mutual understanding. The two of you have developed a way of being together that feels substantial, and trustworthy, and can be carried forward. That's what I knew ten years ago. What I didn't know is that after you get married, everything you had built together in your relationship has to be built again. Of course I had heard married couples talk about rediscovering one another—which made me roll my eyes. I had heard of second honeymoons and had observed cycles in marriages, where the partners periodically drift apart and come together. But, in my ignorance, I really did not understand that you don't become husband and wife once. You do it over and over.

Now, as we come to the end of the book of Sh'mot, God and the people of Israel are finishing their wedding preparations. They've built a very expensive huppah. They've laid out the fancy clothes and the elaborate feast. The intention is, they're going to live together now, in consecration. As for what actually happens: The repetitions in the text should confirm for us what our lived experience teaches. The wedding happens once, but the marriage will have to be remade, over and over.

So, with that in mind, I think I can finally talk about the only really puzzling part of Vayakhel-Pekudei. It comes right at the beginning. Moshe says, "These are the things, ha-devarim, that God has commanded you to do." And he decrees the Shabbat—which is one thing. Then Moshe says, "This is the thing, ha-davar, that God has commanded you." And he gives a long list of many things.

So the text appears to be ungrammatical, or illogical. And yet it's not, if you think in terms of time, rather than tasks. The mishkan is built only once, so it makes sense to say, "This is the thing that God has commanded." But you celebrate Shabbat again and again—and so, "These are the things that God has commanded."

Which is more important, which takes precedence: the one-time big event, or the regularly recurring experience? We know which comes first in the parsha.

Blessed are you, Lord our God, who makes us repeat ourselves.

Shabbat shalom.

Dvar Torah 3/9/19 – Evolving Trends

Judy Oppenheim

**Intro**

On my recent trip to Israel I visited the Hebrew Music Museum– which includes a VR experience that brings to life what holidays were like during the time of the beit hamikdash.

How we celebrate holidays is always changing.

I'd like to share with you a few stories of how and why some traditions have evolved over the past 100 years.

And then share a few stories about my father whose 97th birthday and 24th yarzheit are today.

Purim is coming up next so let's start with mishloach manot.

## Mishloach Manot

Jewish rituals have become somewhat of a **competitive sport** in the past decade or two.

Growing up we had the same meatloaf and chicken most shabbats with grapefruit as a starter and marble cake for dessert.

Now the bar has been raised and many households feel the pressure to cook gourmet or ethnic meals, while regularly adding new recipes.

**This raising the bar is especially true for Mishloach manot** - which when I was a kid consisted of home baked cookies and cake with some candy throw in on a paper plate covered with saran wrap - if you were fancy it was tied with a ribbon.

Now packages have become more elaborate with custom themes, coordinated containers, and possibly also matching costumes and poems.

**What are some the trends behind what's been termed "the mishloach manot wars"?**

One was the rise of Martha Stewart who promoted a lifestyle of creative self-expression and raised the bar for decorating, entertaining and cooking – leading to the phrase "**Martha Stewart Judaism".**

Jews having more disposable income and financial stability, along with societal pressure to spend - also supported the trend.

And social media adds even more pressure with people posting photos of their creations.

All this being justified by the concept of **hiddur mitzvah** [enhancement of the mitzvah]."

**For every trend there's one or more counter trends. With mishloach manot…**

- Rabbis have begun encouraging people to scale back – including a "**Purim is Pashut**" (simple) campaign in Passaic

- People can send a card to friends informing them that a contribution has been made in their honor

- And shul's like AC let you make a donation, and everyone gets just one mishloach manot

- These tie into the **Marie Kondo** trend of simplifying and having less stuff – and the Jewish principle **of bal tashchit** (not having senseless waste)

- These counter trends shift the focus from mishloach manot back to **matanot levyonin** (money for the poor)

## Sufganiyot

Another holiday that has a focus on food is Chanukah.

My second story is about where **Sufganiyot** (or filled donuts) came from and where they might be headed in the future.

The tradition of eating fried dough for Chanukah was first mentioned in the12th century by Maimonides' father Rabbi Maimon ben Yosef, who wrote:

**"One must not make light of the custom of eating *sofganim* [fried fritters] on Chanukah. It is a custom of the *Kadmonim* [the ancient ones]".**

The original sufganiyot were primarily filled with **savory** foods since sugar was both expensive and rare.

This changed in the 16th century **when cane sugar started arriving from the Caribbean** – leading to a pastry revolution in Europe and jelly donuts becoming popular as a holiday treat.

**Polish Jews** fried them in schmaltz or oil and called them ponchiks. In certain areas they became the favorite Hanukkah dessert.

Polish immigrants brought ponchiks to Israel where they were given the name **sufganiyah (sufganiyot plural)**, from a "**spongy dough**" mentioned in the Talmud, **sofgan**.

Leaders in the early days of the **Yishuv** were working on **forging a national identity** using distinctive national foods and traditions as one of their tools.

In the late 1920s, the **Histadrut,** the Israeli labor federation, chose to promote sufganiyot over latkes because they were harder to make at home – and sufganiyot would therefore provide more work for the labor unions.

They also started selling them well before Hanukah since the earlier they started the more work for the bakers.

**Since then**, as Israel has continued to become both more affluent and more of a foodie culture, and social media has exploded, sufganiyot options have continued to evolve.

Some of Israel's top pastry chef's work on new collections every year.

**The Roladin bakery** chain is famous for their over the top creations - think "**Baked by Melissa**" but as donuts with plastic syringes for injecting fillings. They're colorful, instagrammable and high calorie.

As with mishloach manot this trend of over the top sufganiyot has **counter trends**.

With as many Israelis as Americans worrying about obesity and diabetes there is now a trend to make **smaller** sufganiyot following a 2016 anti-junk food campaign by the Health Ministry.

A related trend is to offer **baked** rather than fried sufganiyot.

**Another counter trend** is to make sufganiyot **simpler** rather than more over the top. The appeal of **Sfinjin** – a humbler version of sufganiyot is that it's easier to make at home.

Its origins are from Morocco and you just take a bit of dough, poke a hole in it and deep fry it. Its appeal is also connected with the growing prominence of Sephardic traditions in Israeli society – including Sephardic food and music.

A final emerging trend - **savory** sufganiyot - brings us full circle to the original savory donuts before sugar became readily available.

This time its thanks to people's desire to cut down on sugar, to olive oil companies' promoting savory sufganiyot fried in olive oil, and to increasing familiarity with variations from other countries such as *Panzerotti* from Italy.

## Hanukah

Another shift in observance that you may have noticed is celebrating a **holiday season** rather than celebrating a holiday on the **exact** day it falls on the calendar.

**Christmas** has turned into a **holiday season**. And people wish each other "happy holidays" as our society has become more multicultural and more sensitive to not everyone being Christian.

Creating a holiday season works commercially with more time to spend money.

**And it works for families** who find it harder to get together on the exact dates of a holiday. This is especially true as families are increasingly spread out geographically.

For some parents and grandparents what's key is sharing traditions and creating memories with the most important people in their lives, even if it's not the exact date on the calendar when the rest of the world is observing the holiday.

**One precursor** to changing the date for a Seder was the emergence of theme Seders such as feminists and civil rights Seders in the 60s that were focused on promoting social causes.

They were never scheduled on an actual Seder night or meant to replace the actual Seder but now some people just go to those.

And theme Seders opened the door to celebrating on an alternate date.

Some of my orthodox relatives who of course celebrate Chanukah on the actual holiday also get together for a Sunday brunch that may or may not be on Chanukah depending on everyone's schedules – since coordinating 30 people is challenging.

Families are doing this with **Seders** as well – having a smaller Seder on the traditional night and a larger one when it works for everyone.

## Closing

While I've been thinking about evolution and change in religious celebrations, I've also been thinking about how much has changed since my father was born in 1922.

My dad, Joseph Oppenheim, grew up in Dorchester. He went to Boy's Latin and Harvard, while also attending Hebrew College.

His college career was interrupted by WW2 when he immediately volunteered to join the Navy and then served in the Pacific.

**Some of the holidays food traditions he grew up with included:**

- Swinging a **chicken** by the neck erev Yom Kippur – which we've now replaced with money

- Not eating **dairy** on Pesach since they couldn't find kosher milk products then

- His family making their **own wine** in the bathtub on Pesach. During **Prohibition** the government allowed up to 10 gallons a year for religious use.

**My father was ahead of his time in many ways**

- Unlike most dads he made our lunches every day, did the grocery shopping, and helped with the laundry

- **He was an early adopter of the gig economy** – he left being a 1950s organization man to become a real estate broker – matching people looking for apartments with landlords.

  It gave him the freedom to work on his schedule, work from home, and spend a good amount of time outdoors.

- **And he was an early adopter of the sharing economy**
  - We were the only family I knew growing up without a car
  - He would lend blankets, pillows and cots to young people moving into their first apartments
  - And if he knew someone Jewish was moving out of an apartment and a non-Jew moving in – he would take the mezuzah and later give it to someone Jewish moving who needed one

**He was a passionate Zionist who…**

- **Helped with gun running** through Canada after his mother wouldn't let her only son go to Israel to fight in the war of independence.

- He was a dedicated treasurer for **Hapoel Mizrachi** raising money for Bnei Akivah high schools in Israel

- And was very proud that his oldest daughter made **Aliyah** and his grandchildren were Sabras

While my father was rarely home for weekday dinners because of his work - he was always home for Shabbat and holidays. And many of my best memories of my Dad are:

- from our Seders where everyone actively participated,
- and singing Chanukah songs after lighting candles.

His love of family, Israel and Judaism continue to inspire me.

**Zichrono livracha**

May his memory be a blessing

**Shabbat shalom**

Parashat Vayikra March 17 1996
Bethamie Horowitz

This week we begin to read the book of Leviticus or Vayikra. In Vayikra we move away from the archetypal stories and vivid narratives found in Genesis and Exodus and we enter a world of rituals and practices that seems very distant from our own experience. With its lack of a story line and its focus on the minutiae of apparently arcane law and ritual practice, it is perhaps the least user-friendly book in the Bible!

In the rabbinic (post-biblical) period Leviticus was called the Priestly Code, because much of its content is about the duties of the priests, who were responsible for the Temple and its sacrifices and services. The book as a whole describes in full detail the ritual and legal aspects of ancient Israelite life. It is a sort of handbook for Priests, who, of course, ceased to have a role, having been downsized when their jobs were eliminated from Jewish practice with the destruction of the Temple. So the whole book seems to the modern reader entirely remote.

Not only are the blood and guts of the sacrifices outside of our routine experience (except for the surgeons and butchers among us), but our own way of practicing Judaism is based on an entirely different premise than that of the priests. The rabbis in the generations immediately following the destruction of the Temple made a brilliant transformation -- they replaced the priestly rituals with rituals at home and in the synagogue, which enacted in abstract form the sacrificial system recorded in Leviticus (and elsewhere) in the Bible. . Where the priests offered sacrifices of animals and grain, we offer our thanks by saying a blessing over bread before we eat a meal..

This week's parasha/torah portion (also named Vayikra) covers the first few chapters of Leviticus, those dealing with the five sacrifices or offerings that pertain to individuals. These are described in graphic detail -- how the animal is chosen, then slaughtered, how the blood is sprinkled and the sacrifice is burned. It seems completely foreign, even pagan, to our modern day sensibilities. What does it have to teach us?

Rather than attending to the "what and how" of the sacrifices, let us consider the "why". The sacrifices are really a means of relating to God. They are offerings, not sacrifices (not things given up, but things gladly offered), a means of marking the changes in a person's (or community's) status throughout the year and throughout the lifetime. The children of Israel offered to God a portion of the animals and crops which they had tended and nurtured throughout the year. In bringing sacrifices to the Temple they were returning to God that which was God's. These offerings remind us that we don't own these things, rather God does.

We can ask ourselves today, what of our own offerings? If for our ancestors giving an offering meant bringing the work of their hands, in what way for us could our own work include a kind of offering? Do our current lives which are so divorced from nature make it difficult to even draw these kinds of analogies? Perhaps so, but I hope we can think about these issues as a way of enriching our work and our lives.

Any suggestions? Feel free to respond..

**Vayikra: 5 Nisan 5770/March 20, 2010**

**There Will Be Blood**

Shabbat shalom—or gut shabbos, as the case may be.

We have just finished reading parshat Vayikra. At this point in the service, it is our custom to change the subject.

And by "*our* custom," I don't refer only to the members of egalitarian, conservadox, semi-vegetarian minyans on the Upper West Side. The subject matter of Vayikra has been something of an embarrassment to our people for a very long time.

Go back to the late 12th century and you find Maimonides explaining that *of course* the sacrifices were utterly unnecessary. If you think historically, Rambam says, you realize that at the time of the revelation at Sinai, the people around the Israelites all practiced animal sacrifice—and so the Israelites would have been shocked if they, too, had not been given some such commandments. In Rambam's view, the sacrifices were a kind of spiritual busy-work, assigned to us as if in an outmoded Montessori school of the soul, with the understanding that this butchery was something we would grow out of.

Go back another thousand years and more, and you find that the rabbis, too, could think that all the slicing and dicing we just read about was not really needed. What shall we do, someone asked Yochanan ben Zakkai, now that the Temple has been destroyed, and we cannot perform the sacrifices? To which ben Zakkai famously replied, don't worry. Instead of making sacrifices, we'll offer up deeds of lovingkindness.

And about six hundred years before ben Zakkai, the prophet Isaiah declared in God's name, "What good are all your sacrifices to me? I'm fed up with burnt rams and the fat of beasts; and the blood of bullocks and lambs and goats is not all that delightful."

A long tradition of wanting to change the subject. And yet, as we know, there's also another attitude. The prophet Ezekiel was intensely committed to seeing the sacrifices performed. The rabbis considered the discontinuation of the tamid, the perpetual daily offerings, to have been a national catastrophe. A thousand years later, Rashi cared so much about the sacrifices that he thought a reasonable person would assume the Torah should begin with parshat Vayikra. That was in fact where Torah study traditionally began. And the subject looms even in our immediate future. In about fifteen or twenty minutes, this egaliatarian, conservadox minyan will davven Musaf, and have an opportunity to pray for the restoration of animal sacrifice.

As with so much else in Judaism, we have here an ambivalence that can't be resolved, or that we wouldn't want to resolve. The primitive, unreasoning character of animal sacrifice moves us to moral and physical squeamishness. At the same time we absolutely cannot give up thinking about it. For some reason, we keep in mind these rites we cannot perform.

Now, the push-and-pull between these two feelings is clearly not the same for all Jews. There are many congregations that want to read as little as possible of Vayikra. There are even commentators today who claim that the laws of Torah move us toward the ideal of vegetarianism.

However, with all respect and affection for my friends in this room who have sworn off meat, I have made a back-of-envelope calculation of the obligatory sacrifices, and it looks as if those rites alone required the slaughter each year of 1,027 lambs, 113 bullocks, 37 rams and 30 goats, for an annual total of 1,207 immolated animals. I do not consider this to be the arithmetic of a vegetarian tradition. So, out of respect for what I

find in the text, and also for what I take to be the mainstream of rabbinic thought, I am going to take a somewhat unusual approach today. I am actually going to talk about the sacrifices.

I don't want to exaggerate the novelty. Several of our darshanim in the past have in fact spoken directly about the sacrifices. These have mostly been medical personnel, plus the mad barbecuer Michael Paley. But I do think we tend to avoid the obvious subject. So, if you really can't bear the thought of blood, this might be the time to leave.

Or not, actually—because it turns out to be very difficult to get to what we might call the juice of Vayikra. This text is as boring, as dry, as you would expect a user's manual to be. In fact, it's hardly even a user's manual. Basic terms go undefined, knowledge of procedures is assumed, the order in which topics is addressed is left unexplained, and for all we know is less than exhaustive. Vayikra is more like a memorandum, or an aide-mémoire, you should excuse my Yiddish. If any text provides decisive evidence of the existence of an oral Torah, then it's parshat Vayikra. Beyond the margins of these written notes, there had to have been an entire world of lived experience, and word-of-mouth information about that experience, which Vayikra does not even summarize. It just gives you hints.

How can you work your way into such a text? Looking for guidance, I decided the oral Torah might actually be a good place to start. And sure enough, paging through the records, I found what I was looking for in Mishnah Tamid. I know, today's parsha is not about the tamid. It's about other categories of offerings. But in Mishnah Tamid, you get an account of the people who carried out all of these sacrifices. More than an account. I would call it a movie.

I haven't previously talked about movies before this minyan. But let me summarize the description in Mishnah Tamid of the sleeping quarters of the young priests. It's a vaulted room, with a hearth. Young men are sprawled on all sides, lying on mattresses spread on the pavement. Their consecrated garments are rolled up under their heads, to serve as pillows—so you might say these men are dreaming on their priesthood. Meanwhile, they're lying naked beneath their regular clothes, which they use as blankets. I don't think you need to hold the Endowed Chair in Queer Studies at Oscar Wilde University to appreciate the heavy, languorous sensuality in this scene, with the heat of the hearth, the heat of the young men's dozing bodies, the proximity of one to another. And then, one of them rises from where he's been lying. Why? His dreams have not been entirely priestly in nature, and he needs to go down to the mikvah. Imagine yourself following this young man, sleepy, tingling, who is picking his way through the bodies as he shuffles toward the colder air and the cold water. Then, as he walks along the corridor, comes the line that turns this scene into a movie: "And lamps flicker on this side and that."

I think this is amazing. The Mishnah pauses to insert a detail that is pure scenography, with no other purpose: "And lamps flicker on this side and that." The inclusion of this sentence can mean only that we are to project ourselves into this picture, to see and feel what this young priest was experiencing.

I am going to assume that Mishnah Tamid gives me permission to attempt a similar self-projection into parshat Vayikra. It's difficult, as I said. We don't get many useful details. But there's enough to allow for a movie of sorts—if not a narrative, then a montage sequence, maybe in the Bressonian style, made up of observational close-ups of activity.

Again, the process begins with self-projection—which seems to be a necessity with Vayikra, if you don't happen to be the High Priest. The parsha is focused intently on the actions of this one man. To read it is to identify with him.

And there are details—literally a handful—that allow you to imagine his experience as he officiates. Think of how many times the parsha specifies how the High Priest uses his hands in carrying out the sacrifices. Maybe this seems to you to be an obvious detail, not worth pondering. What else was the High Priest supposed to use, if not his hands? I suppose he could have lived up to the expectations of the anti-Semites and used his tentacles; but, really, the use of the hands is something to be assumed.

So why then does the parsha insist on something that might be taken for granted? At this point the priest presses his hand onto an animal's head, feeling its warmth and its fur; at this point he digs his hand deep into moist, oily flour, to grab a portion; now he dips his finger into hot blood and flings its drops away from him; and now he takes his long thumbnail and feels it gouge into the neck of a bird, then slice through the flesh. Vayikra says much more about the hand than it strictly needs to. Why? What *is* the hand? Not simply an instrument, but the part of the body where our sense of touch is most heightened and most active. Once I think of this, and in imagination plunge my own hands into the actions being catalogued, parshat Vayikra becomes anything but dry.

I welcome this possibility for two reasons. First, and most obviously, because it allows me to take an extremely boring text and make it tactile and immediate. Second, because in the push-and-pull of Jewish attitudes toward the sacrifices, the pull in our time has been very strongly toward allegorizing and historicizing them out of existence. I

include myself. On a personal note: I took this assignment to force myself at last to pay attention to Vayikra.

I'm all for moralized readings—we have a great tradition of them. But our moralism, as much as our historical thinking, needs the irreducible touch of blood, of animal flesh, of mere creatural existence—what Yeats called "the uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor." That's what we get if we push our thoughts toward the sacrifices, and toward a God who is not unacquainted with filth, and stench, and physical suffering.

My proof text is the same chapter of Isaiah I quoted earlier. "When you spread forth your hands," God says, "*your hands*, I will hide my eyes from you. And when you make many prayers, I will not hear. Your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean, put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes."

Yes, we need to wash our hands. The whole world needs to wash its hands. But those of us who choose to lead Jewish lives also need to remember, always, how it felt to get them dirty.

Shabbat shalom.

# 70th Birthday (iyH)

First, I would like to begin with a public service announcement: Pesach begins in two weeks and if you are not already totally prepared, you are screwed. Having set your minds at ease, I did want to take advantage of the proximity of the holiday to review a bit of the Haggadah which is of particular interest. Early on, immediately after Avadim Hayinu and the Rabbis at Bnei Brak, we read that Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah said "Although I am like a man of seventy I was never privileged to understand why the story of the Exodus should be told at night until Ben Zoma interpreted it..." What does this mean that Elazar ben Azariah is "like" a man of seventy? The Bavli relates how Elazar ben Azariah was a compromise candidate for the position of head of the Sanhedrin chosen because he was wise, rich and a descendant of Ezra but there was an objection because he was only eighteen years old. So a miracle occurred whereby his hair and beard turned white overnight so he could appear to be a sage of seventy. As of yesterday, I am a man of seventy, without being a sage.

While I have no illusions about being able to, or even intending to, capture what it means to me to turn seventy, I thought it would be unseemly to allow the occasion to pass without comment, given that you have been good enough to listen to my divrei Torah for thirty-eight years now. I thought this was particularly not an event to let pass unmentioned since it is Shabbos Vayikra, Rosh Hodesh, Ha Hodesh and St. Patrick's Day, a combination which will not occur again the day after my birthday until I am long gone. And so I would like to offer a series of thoughts and quotes on a theme.

In the sefer Torah, there is a scribal addition of a little aleph at the end of the opening word of parshah Vayikra. This is because it was unacceptable to Tradition that God would "call" to Moses with the same defectively spelled word as God called to the pagan prophet Balaam in Numbers 23:4. Therefore, the scribes differentiated the call to Moses by providing him with the complete spelling of the word. I don't think the call of the Torah or of God or of tradition or of history is defective; I think I am. But, increasingly, I am more at ease with the conclusion I am doing what I can with what I have.

The parsha, in Leviticus 3:1, speaks of a zevach shelamim, a sacrifice of well-being or of gratitude, which was always individual and never collective. it is not possible to express sufficient gratitude simply for being given life, much less this one, and yet, sometimes, we may lose perspective and despair about the world we are bequeathing to our grandchildren. W.S. Merwin wrote *Thanks* when he was sixty years old and here he passes through irony and out the other side:

Listen

with the night falling we are saying thank you

we are stopping on the bridges to bow from the railings

we are running out of the glass rooms

with our mouths full of food to look at the sky

and say thank you

we are standing by the water thanking it

standing by the windows looking out

in our directions

back from a series of hospitals back from a mugging

after funerals we are saying thank you

after the news of the dead

whether or not we knew them we are saying thank you

over telephones we are saying thank you

in doorways and in the backs of cars and in elevators

remembering wars and the police at the door

and the beatings on stairs we are saying thank you

in the banks we are saying thank you

in the faces of the officials and the rich

and of all who will never change

we go on saying thank you thank you

with the animals dying around us

our lost feelings we are saying thank you

with the forests falling faster than the minutes

of our lives we are saying thank you

with the words going out like cells of a brain

with the cities growing over us

we are saying thank you faster and faster

with nobody listening we are saying thank you

we are [still] saying thank you and waving

dark though it is

It is Rosh Hodesh and Ha Hodesh. This is the one time of the year they coalesce, the New Month and The Month. We were given Rosh Hodesh in combination with Pesach in Exodus 12:2: "This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you" just before the tenth Plague. This was the first commandment given to us as the Israelite community and by it we are told to be mindful of the passage of time. Kohelet puts the passage of time on a very personal level: [11:9] "Rejoice, young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you, in the days of your youth..." but also adds [12:1]: "So remember your Creator in the days of your youth; before the days of trouble come, and the years draw near of which you will say: 'I have no desire in them.'" Kohelet then goes on to vividly describe the maladies of aging, concluding with [12:7]: "And the dust returns to the earth as it was; and the spirit returns to God Who gave it."

This is St. Patrick's Day. The title of Joyce's novel *Finnegans Wake* does not simply refer to the wake of a man named Finnegan who fell from a ladder, was knocked unconscious and was thought dead until a bit of thrown whiskey lands in his mouth and revives him, since whisky means 'water of life.' You may have noticed that the title as printed has no apostrophe and so, in another Joycean joke, it is not a possessive, but a plural command. Joyce is saying all of you Finnegans out there, which is all of us, Irish or not, should wake from our torpor and possess our lives.

A few random observations:

Fifty years ago I bought my first and only new car, a BMW, the first year that mark was imported into the US on my brother's advice because it was exciting. It cost $2400 and had power nothing but I understood it. A few weeks ago I bought my second and, no doubt, last new car, a Subaru Forester because it is safe. It cost a lot more and was so computerized it is beyond my 20th century mechanics.

I learned the new math. No, not the crap they teach in school. This was grandparents' math: the difference between zero grandchildren and one is infinite; the difference between one grandchild and two is one. I also learned the new semantics: the phrase "objective grandparent" is a joke.

In Genesis 48:1 Joseph is told "Your father is ill." This is the first time in Torah anyone is described as ill. Previously, Biblical figures just died at a given time. Given what chronic illness can feel like, no wonder the Torah held off in informing us.

I realized when Eliot wrote in *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* "[I] Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons, I have measured out my life with coffee spoons..."about an empty life misspent because devoid of human contact, he did not have in mind my laying out Dina's morning coffee setup the night before for forty-one years.

I realized when the Beach Boys wrote "God only knows what I'd be without you," they did have Dina in mind. The Beach Boys are consistent with Sefer Ha Chinuch (579): "A husband must regard his wife as the most precious element of his life."

When did my geriatric patients become younger than I am?

When I was young pixilated with two 'I's' meant confused like a pixie. Now pixelated with two 'e's' means porn being covered or a politician being caught. In another generation, no one will recall why the symbol for making an attachment is that bent thing.

Seventy is not the new fifty. Your coronaries, kidneys and brain know just how old you are.

Shakespeare in Act II, scene 7 of *As You Like It*, almost got it right. "So, from hour to hour, we ripe and ripe, And then, from hour to hour, we rot and rot; And thereby hangs a tale." That is not a tale; it is the only tale worth telling.

In terms of ripening into wisdom, does that necessarily come with age? Sadly no, but the best statement I have encountered of what can take place is this from Knausgaard: "To turn forty is to realize that one's limitations will last one's whole life through, but also to know that all the time, whether one likes it or not, and whether one is aware of it or not, new layers are being added to one's character, a type of knowledge and insight that isn't directed towards the future, towards what will come to pass or one day be accomplished, but towards the here and now, in the things you do every day, in what you think about them and what you understand of them."

The greatest social fear in aging, at least for me, is passing the threshold of when younger people come to relegate you to a category of no longer being worth listening to. Tolstoy captures this in a passage from *Anna Karenina* when Levin is in Moscow waiting for his wife Kitty to give birth and so he finds himself visiting his father-in-law's aristocratic club. His father-in-law, Prince Shcherbatsky, no youngster himself, says: "'Yes, for you it's interesting. But my interest is different from yours. You look at these little old men,' he said, indicating a club member with a bent back and a hanging lower lip who walked towards and then past them, barely moving his feet in their soft boots, 'and you think they were born such sloshers.' 'Why sloshers?' ... 'It's our club term. You know, when you're rolling hard-boiled eggs, an egg that's been rolled a lot gets all cracked and turns into a slosher. It's the same with our kind: we keep coming and coming to the club and turn into sloshers.'...Prince Chechensky ...was always playing billiards. Some three years ago he was still a fine fellow and not one of the sloshers. He even called other men sloshers....One day Prince Chechensky asks the porter, "Well, Vassily, who's here? Any sloshers?" And he says to him "You're the third." Yes, brother, so it goes.'"

We read Psalm 90 today, as we do every Shabbos and yontif: "The days of our years are seventy, or, if we be granted special vigor, eighty." The only suitable response I can mount to the anxiety of this at age seventy is from the sage Charles Schulz: Charlie Brown-"Someday we will all die, Snoopy." Snoopy-"True, but on all the other days we will not."

Howard L. Berkowitz, March 17, 2018

Shabbat shalom.

One of the great lessons of this week's parshah is that *het* happens. People sin by accident.

One way that accidental sin occurs is when someone is mistaken about the facts of a situation.

For example, she thinks the food she about to eat is kosher, but it turns out to be a ham sandwich. Ooops.

Another, perhaps more complicated way of sinning by accident is when you've been told that something is kosher and it turns out that whoever told you this was wrong.

But too late, you already ate it.

In both of these cases, the person did not intend to sin, but sin she did.

The act was prohibited although the intention was pure. Can you even call that a sin?

Well, according to our *parsha* the world does not revolve around your intention or mine. Even the things we do by accident have consequences.

If you still have your *humash*, take it out and look at Leviticus, chapter 4:

> The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the Israelite people, saying that:
>
> When a person unwittingly incurs guilt in regard to any of the Lord's commandments about things not to be done, and does one of them — 3 ***If it is the anointed priest who has incurred guilt***, so that blame falls upon the people, he shall offer for the sin of which he is guilty a bull of the herd without blemish as a sin offering to the Lord...
>
> 13 ***If it is the whole community of Israel that has erred*** and the matter escapes the notice of the congregation, so that they do any of the things which by the Lord's commandments ought not to be done, and they realize their guilt — 14 when the sin through which they incurred guilt becomes known, the congregation shall offer a bull of the herd as a sin offering, and bring it before the Tent of Meeting...
>
> 22 ***In case it is a chieftain who incurs guilt*** by doing unwittingly any of the things which by the commandment of the Lord his God ought not to be done, and he realizes his guilt — 23 or the sin of which he is guilty is brought to his knowledge — he shall bring as his offering a male goat without blemish...
>
> 27 ***If any person from among the populace unwittingly incurs guilt*** by doing any of the things which by the Lord's commandments ought not to be done, and he realizes his

guilt — 28 or the sin of which he is guilty is brought to his knowledge — he shall bring a female goat without blemish as his offering for the sin of which he is guilty. ...

Here we have the religious leadership, the political leadership, individual Israelites and the entire community.

If any of these parties sin by accident, atonement is required. Specifically, a sacrifice that the text calls a *hattat* must be offered by the priest, and its blood sprinkled or dabbed around the offering site.

Most bibles translate *hattat* as a sin offering, since the Hebrew word for sin is *het*, and the sacrifice is required when a person sins.

But Professor Rabbeynu Jacob Migrom has shown us that *hattat* does not mean sin offering.

Instead it is connected to the verb for purification – *hitui*. Milgrom demonstrates that the blood of the sacrifice acts as a kind of ritual detergent, and the key function of the sacrifice is to purify by sprinkling the blood.

And what, according to Milgrom, is being purified?

It is not, as you might think, the soul of the sinner. The sinner, after all, didn't even do this on purpose.

No, the sprinkling of the blood is intended to purify the sanctuary, which is stained by the accidental sins of the people.

When you and I sin by accident, we may not even notice that we've done something wrong, but Leviticus tells us that our actions have invisible and powerful effects.

If enough sin builds up in the sanctuary, it will drive God away.

The function of the *hattat* is to prevent that from happening. Once we realize the impact we have had, we need to move to reverse it. Left unattended, the effect of our sins on public institutions potentially disastrous.

Milgrom calls this "the Priestly Picture of Dorian Gray". Sins don't manifest on the sinner but somewhere else. This time, not on a portrait of the sinner, but on the sanctuary where the community worships.

I find this picture of unintended but very real effects of our actions on our public institutions extremely powerful. There was a time when many, but certainly never all Americans though slavery was legal and moral. Their actions were ultimately revealed as sins, and the impact of

those sins not just on the humans subjected to slavery but also on the country's public institutions was profound and generationally damaging.

For years, many of us participated in a carbon economy whose impact we did not understand or see.

Intended or not, our actions have had a profound and perhaps irreversible impact on the planet.

Vayikra is telling us that when we realize that things we did not understand to be wrong and harmful were in fact wrong and harmful, one step to preventing destruction is to admit the sin and start the process of atonement.

Not just every individual, but also sometimes, *kol adat Yisrael*, the entire people, needs to come to terms with the consequences of its actions.

The *gemara* takes communal responsibility seriously and raises a question of how far it extends through time:

1. Rabbi Yossi (T5) said: "The children of the captivity who came out of exile sacrificed burnt-offerings to the God of Israel, twelve bulls for all Israel, ninety-six rams, seventy-seven lambs, twelve goats as a sin-offering; all this was a burnt-offering unto the Lord" (Ezra 8:35)...it is taught in a *baraita* that Rabbi Yehudah (T5) says: It was as atonement for idol worship that they brought them; and Rav Yehudah (AB2) says that Shmuel (AB1) says: It was atonement for the idol worship that they practiced during the days of Zedekiah.
2. [...]
3. But didn't those who sinned die?
4. Rav Pappa said: When we learned: the fate of a *hattat* whose owners have died is to allow the animal to die. This matter applies specifically with regard to an individual, not with regard to a congregation, because there is no death with regard to a congregation (אין מיתה בצבור).
5. From where does Rav Pappa derive this? If we say that he derives it from that which is written: "Instead of your fathers shall be your sons/תחת אבותיך יהיו בניך" (Psalms 45:17), if so, the same should be true even with regard to an individual as well.
6. Rather, the inference of Rav Pappa is from the goat of the New Moon, as the Merciful One states: Bring those offerings from the collection of the [half-shekel collection brought every Adar to the] Temple treasury. But haven't some of the Jewish people died since Adar? If so, how can those who remain bring a sin-offering? Rather, learn from it that a sin-offering whose owners have died may be sacrificed in the case of a communal offering.

Scripture describes the sacrifices offered by those who returned to Jerusalem at the time of Ezra:

"The returning exiles who arrived from captivity made burnt offerings to the God of Israel: twelve bulls for all Israel, ninety-six rams, seventy-seven lambs and twelve he-goats as a purification offering (hattat), all this a burnt offering (olah) to the LORD." (Ezra 8:35)

What was the nature of the hattat sacrifices offered by the returnees at the time of Ezra? What sins was the community atoning for? Rabbi Yehudah explains that it was atonement for sins of idolatry. Shmuel specifies that it was "for the idol worship that they practiced during the days of Tzidkiyah."

Tzidkiyah (Zedekiah) was the 20th and last king of Judah before the destruction of the kingdom by King Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon in 586 BCE. The exiles returned to Jerusalem under Ezra in 458 BCE, the first year of the reign of Cyrus the Great, some 72 years later. Of Zedekiah, it is written that he "did what was displeasing to the LORD, just as Yehoyakim had done," and that "Jerusalem and Judah were a cause of anger for the LORD, so that He cast them out of His presence." (II Kings 24:19-20)

The Gemara raises a question about the idea of *hattat* sacrifices offered for sins committed a generation ago: hadn't the people who committed those sins died? And if so, could the community at the time of Ezra offer sacrifices to atone for sins of generations past?

Rav Pappa answers in the affirmative by pointing out a difference between private and communal *hattat* sacrifices. When an individual who sins dies, his sins die with him. So if an individual designated an animal as a *hattat* and then died, the animal cannot be sacrificed, since the death of the owner means that the atonement it is intended to effect has no "address". Consecrated as a sacrifice but now no longer fit to serve as a sacrifice, the animal is consigned to die (cf. *Mishnah Temurah* 2:2).

By contrast, communal *hattat* offerings are not affected if one members of the community dies or even if multiple members die, since the community endures and serves as the address for atonement. In Rav Pappa's terminology, "there is no death with regard to the community/*ayn mitah b'tzibbur*".

Communal guilt and atonement are collective phenomena, and, according to Rav Pappa, the fact that the members of the community who committed sins have died and others now stand in their place makes no difference to the moral standing of the community, which is a collective entity, not an agglomeration of particular individuals.

Of course, it is inspiring to think about the community as somehow eternal – *Am Yisrael hai*!

But with great longevity comes great responsibility. The Gemara wants us to know that imagining continuity of identity for the community has ethical consequences.

And why is any of this relevant to us?

I have been thinking about communal identity a lot recently as I pray for the safety and success of the Ukranian people, and at the same time realize how many of Jews have suffered throughout the ages at the hands of Ukranian anti-Semites. Is this the same people? Should I think of them as carrying the sins of their ancestors or as a new generation that has largely rejected anti-Semitism to the point that the country's current President and Defense minister are both Jewish.

And what about our own country? Is this generation of Americans free from responsibility for the deeds of our ancestors with regard to slavery or genocidal removal of Native Americans from their lands?

My sense is that the answer lies somewhere in between. We cannot be fully responsible for deeds we had no part in, but we must not simply let those sins remain unatoned for. Perhaps the reason why there is no death with respect to the community is that we must at some point purge the Temple of the sins that still threaten our ability to welcome God's presence.

We are not shackled to the past, but neither are we free from responsibility for past wrongs that remain.

Indeed the idea that later versions of a community can atone for sins committed by earlier versions of itself is deeply compatible with the Jewish tradition's insistence that repentance and change is possible, that even death does not close the gates of repentance.

Throughout the ages, Jews have poured huge amounts of time and energy into figuring out how our past connects to our present and illuminates our future. The fourth chapter of Leviticus is not just a catalogue of slaughter and spattered blood. If you look close enough, you will see the way our ancestors dealt with questions we struggle with today: how do we atone for actions we only later realize were sins? Can societies sin, and if, so, how can they atone when the makeup of society is constantly changing?

We may not use the same technologies to explore and resolve these issues, but for spiritually alive people and societies, they are ever present, and *sefer Vayikra* can be our guide.

Shabbat shalom.

# Tzav – 3/23/19

A few months ago, I used the story of Tamar and Judah in Genesis 38, as a back door to talk about the book of Ruth. I suggested that it's not such a bad idea from time to time – and especially in the middle of Vayikra – to take a break from the parashah and take a close look at other Biblical texts, particularly the Haftarah. So, following my own advice, here goes.

In his discussion of the assigning of Haftorot, Ismar Elbogen, one of the greatest scholars of the liturgy, suggests: "it is certain that the Haftarah was introduced in pre-Christian times, because the earliest Christian sources already know the prophetic reading as a fixed institution. Also, the Mishnah [circa 200 CE], whose contents regarding this are much older than the date of its redaction, speaks about the reading of the Prophets in language that compels the conclusion that the institution had long been in existence." However, the initial assigning of Haftorot was limited to certain occasions; it took a few centuries before a prophetic text was assigned to each of the Torah portions. This was a daunting task since it involved assigning 83 Haftorot, including the readings for Shabbat and holidays. The Talmud supports the idea that the Haftarah was assigned based on some relationship between the Torah and the Prophetic text, but it would be a mistake to assume that the rabbis were entirely straightforward in their assignments. Today's Haftorah, for instance, stands in fascinating juxtaposition – even opposition – to the parashah.

Tsav deals entirely with the technicalities of sacrificial worship; it opens with God commanding Moses – "This is the ritual of the burnt offering." – and concludes with the note - "And Aaron and his sons did all the things that the Lord had commanded through Moses". In between those verses, the parashah is all about Temple sacrifices. But the Haftorah has one of the most startling opening lines of any prophetic text: Jeremiah 7:21 quotes God instructing the people: "Add your burnt offerings to your other sacrifices and eat the meat! For when I freed your fathers from the land of Egypt, I did not speak with them or command them concerning burnt offerings or sacrifice." God's outburst is technically correct since there was no Temple in which to offer sacrifices at the time of the Exodus. There may not yet have been a Vayikra text in the time of Jeremiah, but since he lived during the First Temple period, he must have known that the burnt offering was NOT to be eaten! Verse 4 of our parashah makes this clear: God stipulates that the priest "shall take up the ashes to which the fire has reduced the burnt offering on the alter and place them beside the altar… and carry the ashes outside the camp to a clean place." Yet according to Jeremiah, God is demanding violation of a fundamental of Temple sacrifice. It seems that the rabbis were deliberately undermining the significance of Temple sacrifice by attaching this text to a parashah devoted to Temple sacrifice.

Jewish tradition sees the classical prophets as exemplars of ethical monotheism, scolding and threatening the people whose failure to obey God's commandments leads God to bring down severe punishments on Israel through the agency of neighboring armies. (This is a basic premise of the prophets – if terrible things happen to the people of Israel,

it must result from the action of the omnipotent God of Israel.) Of course, redemption is possible if the people repent of their sinful ways and adhere to God's demands. Which hardly ever happens. Proof of this sin and punishment nexus was the destruction of the Northern Kingdom by Assyria and the dispersion of the Ten Tribes in the mid 8th century BCE - about 150 years before Jeremiah. Hebrew prophecy – which constitutes an extraordinary ethical contribution to humanity – is best understood against the backdrop of the First Temple period when Isaiah, Jeremiah and several of the twelve so-called "minor prophets", all faced the challenge of explaining why the singular, omnipotent God of Israel presided over such suffering at the hands of Israel's neighbors.

Jeremiah prophesied during extraordinarily turbulent times that began with Babylonia laying siege to Judean territory, exiling the king, priests, prophets, elders, craftsmen and many others. Unique among the prophets – at least in terms of the material that makes it into the Bible – Jeremiah was a political force at a time when the fate of Judea depended upon the king and his councilors making astute political decisions. Jeremiah had much to say about the policies that he – on God's behalf – advocated. He warned the king repeatedly that failure to surrender to the Babylonians would lead inevitably to the destruction of the Temple and the monarchy, a prophecy realized in 586. For his efforts, Jeremiah was vilified and imprisoned by King Zedekiah. Royal officials persuaded the king that Jeremiah should be put down into a muddy pit where he would die. Fearful of the prophet's connections to God, the king changed his mind and ordered him removed from that pit. Jeremiah refused the offer of safety from King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylonia and ultimately was taken down to Egypt by supporters prior to the ultimate destruction of Jerusalem. These details, of course, come from the book of Jeremiah.

There's no reason to assume that Jeremiah was anti-sacrifices in general but it was common for the prophets to deride an emphasis on sacrifice, arguing that it was ethical lapses that caused God to send foreign armies against his people. To be concerned about sacrifices when Judah and Jerusalem were in great peril infuriated the prophet but why did the rabbis – who continued to express support for the sacrificial system – choose Jeremiah's fury to pair with parashat Tsav? Why did they adopt a subversive attitude here in Vayikra, the book called Torat Cohanim? Emerging as communal leaders in the centuries following the destruction of the Second Temple, the rabbis' mourning for the Temple seems more form than substance given their quite different religious world view. They may have paid lip service to the loss of the Second Temple but, like Jeremiah who preached at a time of dire threats to the nation, they shared Jeremiah's preoccupation with obedience to Jewish law.

Clearly the rabbis insisted that the Torah text was God's revealed word yet there are many instances in which they effectively reinterpreted Torah law out of existence. This is one of the extraordinary mechanisms by which Jewish tradition adapts over time. The subversive quality of rabbinic thinking is fascinating and it shows up subtly and not so subtly in rabbinic re-interpretations in the Mishnah, Talmud, later codes and tshuvot. It also shows up in subtle structural ways; sometimes evident in the assigning of a particular Haftorah to a particular Parashah (which is what we have here today) or in the way the rabbis edit the Haftorot, an opportunity they did not have with the Torah text. My favorite

example of this editing is the Haftorah from Judges 11 which tells the story of Yiftach, a military leader, who promises that if God will grant him victory in battle, he will sacrifice the first creature that comes out of his house upon his return. There are 40 verses in Judges, Chapter 11; 33 of them are included in the Haftorah which ends with Yiftach's success in battle. But in the next 7 verses we learn the incredible: it is Yiftach's daughter who emerges first to greet her father and who must be sacrificed. How many Jews ever learn how Judges 11 ends? Of course, there are many other examples of rabbinic subversion but for now, I'd like to note that this Haftorah following this parashah can be understood as suggesting that a preoccupation with sacrifices had become irrelevant. This is particularly interesting given that in some corners of the Jewish community, Jews are preparing for the reconstruction of the Temple while others of us just pray for it on a regular basis!

The rabbis certainly agreed that disobedience to God's law has terrible consequences. Jeremiah's insistence that suffering resulted for Judeans in his time who worshiped "the host of heaven which they loved and served and followed, to which they turned and bowed down", may well have resonated for the rabbis to remind Jews living among pagans and new Christians in Palestine or idol worshippers in Babylonia to avoid the pitfall of idolatry. I mean no disrespect to the rabbis when I call them subversive. In fact, they were geniuses at recasting sacred text to uphold the sanctity of the Torah while rendering certain laws moot to reflect the sacred values of their own time. It is remarkable that the Jewish people have survived with an ancient sacred text but this was only possible because of the tradition's adaptive capacity as shepherded by rabbinic elites. A problem for us moderns, of course, is that this adaptive process has stalled in some quarters and we are involved in various kinds of legitimacy squabbles.

Just a few more words about rabbinic subversion in assigning Haftorot. Given the tendency of prophets towards predictions of gloom and doom, they frequently end a Haftorah with verses of consolation from another part of the prophetic text. In this Haftorah, Chapter 7 of Jeremiah ends with a terrifying threat: "And death shall be preferable to life for all that are left of this wicked folk, in all the other places to which I shall banish them – declares the Lord of Hosts." And the two verses from Chapter 8 continue the theme. But rather than end in terror, verses are brought from Jeremiah, chapter 9, that speak of God's preference for receiving earnest devotion: "For I the Lord act with kindness, justice, and equity in the world; For in these I delight – declares the Lord". The rabbis can't change Jeremiah's words but they can do some cutting and pasting to leave us with words of hope.

And sometimes they just rip the words out of context and completely change their meaning. This happens with verse 34 of Jeremiah, chapter 7 which describes portents of doom that are as horrific as any in the Bible: "Assuredly, a time is coming – declares the Lord – when men shall no longer speak of Topeth or the Valley of Ben-hinnom, but of the Valley of Slaughter; and they shall bury in Topheth until no room is left. The carcasses of this people shall be food for the birds of the sky and the beasts of the earth, with none to frighten them off. And I will silence in the towns of Judah and [illegible]

[illegible] the sound of mirth and gladness, the voice of bridegroom and bride [illegible]. For the whole land will fall to ruin."

Not only did the rabbis assign a prophetic reading that subverts the plain meaning of the Torah reading with which it is paired, but they – or perhaps a later generation of rabbis - chose for the centerpiece of the Jewish wedding ceremony words from a verse in Jeremiah 8 that portend the end of life as we know it. Words that we sing again and again and again at an aufruf or wedding as we rejoice with the bridegroom and bride, are adopted from their original context which prophecies that the entire land of Israel will fall to ruin and the sound of mirth and gladness, the voice of bridegroom and bride [illegible]. When the rabbis famously declared in a well-known rabbinic story: "Lo b'shamayim hi" – The Torah is not in heaven – and asserted their right to interpret what the Torah means in every generation, they weren't kidding. Here is Jeremiah put smack in the middle of Torat Cohanim dismissing sacrifices as meaningless and here are the rabbis taking words that prophecy doom and making them the 7th, longest and most joyous of the sheva berakhot. May we be inspired by the creative, subversive genius of the rabbis to ensure that Torah continues to have meaning and inspiration in our day.

Shabbat shalom!

Today is, in many respects, just a another Shabbat in an ongoing chain of shabbatot.

But as the Shabbat before Pesach it's also extraordinary: Shabbat HaGadol.

I want to talk a little bit about the dialectic between the ordinary and the extraordinary in spiritual life and the unavoidable ping ponging that occurs between what is new and what is familiar.

Pesach, of course, is a revolution, changing everything by disrupting four hundred years of slavery and introducing a new era in the lives of our ancestors.

The shift from slavery to freedom was so monumental, it actually reset time for the former slaves:

*Ha-hodesh ha-zeh yihyeh lakhem rosh ha hodashim.* This month, the month we are all now in, Nissan, will be the first of months for you.

No more living your lives by other people's schedules and calendars. This is a new era in which you are now masters of your own time.

*Ha-hodesh ha-zeh*. You are renewed by this exodus, and the sign of your perpetual renewal will be the moon. And the start of your new moons will be the moon of Nisan, when the entire world is undergoing renewal and rebirth.

Perpetual newness. Every month a renewal, and with us at the center of that renewal.

Shabbat comes every week, regardless, but the new month? That depends on us.

Jewish tradition tells us that the days of the month are not fixed until the Court hears valid testimony from human witnesses that they have seen the sliver of the new moon.

As it says in the blessing recited at Kiddush Levanah:

> "And to the moon, God said it should renew itself as a crown of splendor for those borne in the womb, those who are destined to renew themselves like the moon…"
>
> *U'le-levanah amar: stithadesh ateret tiferet l'amusei beten, sh'heim atidin lehithadesh k'motah.*

*Hodesh – hiddush – hadash*: constant rebirth and renewal: is that not the essence of a creative and productive life for us as individuals and for us as a people?

As Rav Nachman of Bratzlav famously said: "I would dislike myself if I found myself standing today at the same place as yesterday."

Well, maybe.

There is something to be said for tradition, yes?

If everything is new, how do we connect to the past?

How are we grounded and connected to each other? Constant innovation and renewal does not allow for the deep engraving of sustaining spiritual patterns, the muscle memory of our souls.

Enter the book of Leviticus. We started last week with a review of the various sacrifices and the details of their offering, from which no creative departure is tolerated. This week's parsha continues on in that mode, describing the protocols for certain sacrifices with an emphasis on the priest portions of those offerings. These details and protocols are at the very center of the Torah, Genesis and Exodus behind us and Numbers and Deuteronomy ahead. This deep dive into sacrifices is also a deep dive into ritual conformity and sameness.

How did we get here? What happened to *ha-hodesh ha-zeh*?

I want to suggest that we got here because of a need for balance and dialectic in spiritual life.

Yes, we need passion and renewal in service of God. But we also need a spiritual home, someplace where things deepen rather than renew.

In the midrash collection Ein Yaakov, the following exchange occurs:

> Ben Zoma said, "I have found a verse that contains the entire Torah:
>
> שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה ׀ אֶחָד (Deut. 6:4)
>
> Hear O Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai is one.
>
> Ben Nanus said: "I have found a verse that contains the entire Torah:
>
> וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֲךָ כָּמוֹךָ (Lev. 19:18)
>
> Love your neighbor as yourself.
>
> Ben Pazi said, "I have found a verse that contains the entire Torah:
>
> אֶת־הַכֶּבֶשׂ הָאֶחָד תַּעֲשֶׂה בַבֹּקֶר וְאֵת הַכֶּבֶשׂ הַשֵּׁנִי תַּעֲשֶׂה בֵּין הָעַרְבָּיִם
>
> 'You will sacrifice a lamb in the morning, and another at dusk.'" (Ex. 29:39)
>
> Rabbi (Yehudah HaNasi), stood up and decided, "The law is according to Ben Pazi.

This remarkable teaching relays a profound truth about serving and loving God.

Not everything needs to be new. Constancy and consistency are also forms of devotion.

Indeed, the deepest relationships I know are built on deep constancy, which builds trust, and trust is the substance of faith. In the Hebrew the two words are the same: *emunah*.

So which is it, renewal or protocol? Exodus or Leviticus? Ben Zoma or Ben Pazi?

Well, obviously, just a day before we are all about to tell the same story we have told year after year at the seder table, attempting to make that old story relevant and new, my answer is that both are essential.

We cannot have a spiritual life without renewal of words and gestures that have fallen into rote and routine.

And we cannot ignore the power of repetition, tradition, and yes, even protocols, for developing spiritual depth.

And so we must insist on incorporating both into our service of God.

We must insist that *hadesh yamenu k'kedem* does not mean: take us back to how it used to be, but help us renew this day, make this day a day of renewal, like the many days of renewal and liberation we experienced before.

Our hearts are our altars, sites of constancy, renewal and faith.

And as it says at the opening of our parsha:

*Esh tamid tukad al ha-mizbeah, lo tikhbeh.*

A perpetual fire will burn on the altar. Do not put it out.

## Shabbat Learning – March 19, 2022 – Tzav – Jeremiah 7:21-34, 8:1-3,

I've often thought about discussing the Haftarah on Shabbat. There are so many extraordinary prophetic texts that deal with issues of theology and eschatology, politics and history. Many of the prophets are fascinating individuals; engaged with the people and, in some cases, with the king and his officials. But prophetic concerns get little attention in Vayikra and certainly not in Tzav, today's parashah. What I had intended to be a discussion about the substance of today's Haftarah has become, instead, a focus on the relationship between the Torah and the Haftarah. The one-to-one relationship between the Torah reading and the Haftarah on Shabbat and festivals appears to have begun as early as the 3rd century BCE according to Ismar Elbogen, author of **Jewish Liturgy**, published in 1913 in German. Elbogen is the go to source for all aspects of the Jewish prayer service and his understanding is that Haftarot were originally short and did not require a fixed number of verses. Some, he notes, were only 4 or 5 verses long and one was only a single verse – Isaiah 52:3: *"For thus said the Lord: You were sold for no price, And shall be redeemed without money."* Traditions evolved over hundreds of years and by the time of the Talmud the sages had committed to linking prophetic texts to all of the Torah readings. Regarding the relationship between the Torah text and the Haftarah, the laconic Gemara (*Megillah 29b*) notes the criterion for the Haftarah to be linked to the Torah is "[one] that resembles it'. Sometimes, the rabbis needed only a relevant word in the Haftarah to qualify for partnership with the Torah. And while today's Haftarah has more relevant words than that, it has an unusual relationship with the parashah.

When it comes to a prophetic text for Tzav, it's clear we're looking for the proverbial square peg in a round hole. Parashah Tzav is concerned entirely with details of the sacrificial system – God's tutorial for Moses, Aaron and Aaron's sons. So there's a conundrum: given the issues that were of concern to the prophets, what prophetic text could be relevant to Tzav? The *Etz Hayim* commentary notes that today's Haftarah falls short of the 21 verse minimum required by our sages. And for an explanation, the ever laconic Talmud explains: "the topic is concluded". It is surprising that the prophet Jeremiah had any verses at all about the sacrificial system given that he lived during the time of the Babylonian conquest of Judah in the 6th century BCE, the destruction of the First Temple and the exile of the king and other important Judeans to Babylonia. Jeremiah – like most of the "classical prophets" - was deeply involved in the critical issues of the time. He was a frequent presence in the palace of the king, spent some time in prison because he criticized the king's policies and ultimately was taken down to Egypt by friends who wanted to keep him safe. Unlike the charismatic prophets Elijah and Elisha, the "classical prophets" like Jeremiah lived in history, coming onto the national scene to address the issues raised by the emergence of the great Empires of the Ancient Near East. Their prophecies were deeply concerned with these hostile neighbors and they spoke to the Israelites over and over again about their sins that had caused God to pour down divine wrath delivered by these powerful neighbors. The prophetic devotion to the idea of a singular, omnipotent divinity insists upon the guilt of the Israelites for their own suffering.

While it is surprising to find Jeremiah addressing issues related to sacrifice, this Haftarah has only 19 verses that were extracted from the 82 verses spanning Jeremiah chapters 7, 8 and 9. And there are no other verses relating to sacrifice in the 52 chapters of his prophecy. As I worked on this, I conjured up a rabbinical student in Babylonia in the 6th century CE, who is given the emergency task of finding 21 verses among the texts for each prophet that were hand

written and rolled together and coming up with only 19 for Tzav. The irony is that the specific verses from Jeremiah that mention sacrifice are at odds with how the Torah understands the same issue. The *Etz Hayim* Commentary calls Jeremiah's 19 verses "a Temple sermon" and the prophets certainly were sermonic. But the irony of that "sermon" is what bothers the commentators: the first verse of Parasha Tzav – "This is the ritual of the burnt offering: The burnt offering itself shall remain where it is burned upon the altar all night until morning, while the fire on the altar is kept going on it." The irony lies in the fact that the Haftarah completely disagrees with these few verses from Jeremiah: "Add your burnt offerings to your other sacrifices and eat the meat! For when I freed your fathers from the land of Egypt, I did not speak with them or command them concerning burnt offerings or sacrifice." And here we have the second problem for the commentators: Leviticus 7:37-38 towards the end of the parashah directly contradicts the Jeremiah text. Jeremiah asserts that God did not speak of burnt offerings while the Torah text has a very different reading: "Such are the rituals of the burnt offering, the meal offering, the sin offering, the guilt offering, the offering of ordination, and the sacrifice of well-being, with which the Lord charged Moses on Mount Sinai, when He commanded the Israelites present their offerings to the Lord in the wilderness." The differences between the Torah text and the Haftarah are striking but perhaps the sages thought it important to have something about sacrifice allied with parashah Tzav even if some of those few verses do not agree with the verses in the Torah!.

The Commentators in *Etz Hayim* note that there have been various theories offered about the difference between Jeremiah's understanding and that of the Torah but it might be that Jeremiah was not as well versed in Leviticus as the close readers of later generations who were able to study both the Torah and the Prophets! I keep wondering who chopped up chapters 7, 8 and 9. These are like finger prints in Jewish history: by the time of the Talmud the sages had long since come to value prophetic texts and decided that the relationship of the Torah and the Haftarah must be consistent, in contrast to the more random relationship of the early days. Tzav – with its emphasis on the sacrificial system – is particularly challenging but the rabbis may have been delighted that the Jeremiah text could begin with verse 21 – "Add your burnt offerings to your other sacrifices and eat the meat!" Whether accurate or not, it was definitely a reference to the Temple and sacrifice. Perhaps Jeremiah – so many centuries after the wilderness experience – simply had his facts wrong.

We don't know exactly when or why the ancient Israelites chose to link the Torah and Haftarah. But the experience of exile and return to the land may have prompted an increasing interest in prophetic texts. Of course the Torah and the Prophets are very different texts but over a few centuries it would not be surprising that literary tastes evolved. Elbogen takes us back to the first century of the Common Era among the Apostles who knew about the practice of reading from the prophets and recorded them accompanying the Torah readings. Luke 4:17 tells the story of Jesus coming to the synagogue in Nazareth where he grew up and being handed the book of Isaiah to read the Haftarah aloud. Elbogen seems to accept this as historical but notes it's not clear from the text whether the book was open to the page where Jesus was expected to read or perhaps he found the verses himself - Isaiah 61:1-2: *"The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, Because the Lord has anointed me; He has sent me as a herald of joy to the humble, to bind up the wounded of heart, To proclaim release to the captives, Liberation to the imprisoned;*

*To proclaim a year of the Lord's favor And a day of vindication by our God, To comfort all who mourn."* Elbogen's regret that he can't confirm a small detail of how Jesus literally handled the text of Isaiah is in the great tradition of German literary precision! But he can also provide more general information: "Whenever ancient Haftarot were in use that could not be lengthened because the prophet moves on to a new theme, these were permitted even if they were shorter." In comments like this, he notes how different the two types of texts were. The Haftarot served as material for "homilies" that had something to do with the subject of the readings that followed the Torah reading, a tradition we follow with the "drash". In some cases, only a minor read the Haftarah, an indication that it was of lower status than the Torah. Other traditions reserved some of the Haftarot for community notables to read. Elbogen is clear that the Torah reading was always the most important: "Out of care that the prophetic reading not be taken more seriously than the reading of the Torah, there was a regulation that the person who reads the Haftarah must first read from the Torah". While this practice was not maintained, the Haftarah reader still recites the blessings before and after the Torah reading. Just like we do. And the lower status of the Haftarah was reflected in the fact that in some cases minors were permitted to read it even though they are not permitted to read from the Torah. This tradition, of course, persists in the practice of the bar and bat mitzvah reading the Haftarah and increasingly in modern times, minors read from the Torah.

To conclude: it seems reasonable to suggest that the words of the prophets ranged over many subjects of interest and concern to the community, perhaps more powerful and accessible to the ancient Israelites than the words of Torah texts like Vayikra. While we can only speculate about the reasons for initially linking the Torah reading and the Haftarah or for the process over time of formalizing this relationship (that led to my fantasy about the rabbinical student search for verses about sacrifice among the prophets!) it is definitely a process that seems rooted in the meaning that these texts had for the community. I hope we'll have more opportunities to study the connections between our ancient texts!

Freunds, Rosens, chaverim, lend me your ears; I come not to bury Deborah Brodie but to praise her.

I had wanted to speak not on her yahrtzeit, the anniversary of her death, but on the celebration of her life, her birthday, March 30th, which was last Shabbos. But that was such a full day, as life sometimes gets, being Shabbos Hol haMoed Pesach, it was thought best to leave the dvar Torah for today. I regretted giving up her actual birthday but we rely on the Torah to always provide for a darshan's needs. Indeed, this week in Shemini we do have two deaths (Lev. 10:1-2): "Now Aaron's sons, Nadav and Avihu, each took his fire pan, put fire in it, and laid incense on it; and they offered before the Lord alien fire, which [God] had not enjoined upon them. And fire came forth from the Lord and consumed them; thus they died at the instance of the Lord." Here there is much death but no dying. Death comes to unaware Nadav and Avihu in an instant, in an exalted and ecstatic state of being "near" to God. This will not be of use to us.

Of the very first recorded Deborah we read (Gen. 35:8): "Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, died, and was buried under the oak below Bethel…" There is no dying there. In Gen. 23(:16-17) we have: "Sarah's lifetime-the span of Sarah's life-came to one hundred and twenty and seven years. Sarah died in Kiriat-arba-now Hevron-in the land of Canaan." Informative, perhaps, about how she lived her life but not how she dealt with dying. In Gen. 25(:7) we read: "This was the total span of Abraham's life: one hundred and seventy-five years. And Abraham breathed his last, dying at a ripe age, old and contented; and he was gathered to his kin." A comforting death but no dying. In Gen. 35(:27) we read: "Isaac was a hundred and eighty years old when he breathed his last and died. He was gathered in his ripe old age; and he was buried by his sons Esau and Jacob." Lovely, but no dying. In Gen. 49(:33) we read: "When Jacob finished his instructions to his sons, he drew his feet into bed and, breathing his last, he was gathered to his people." These are reassuring set pieces which provide no guidance, no ars moriendi. The death of Rebecca is not even recorded in the Torah only that (Gen. 49:31) she was buried in the family cave in the field of Machpelah while the account of Miriam's death could not be more terse (Num. 20:1): "Now Miriam died there and was buried there."

The first reference in the Torah to dying comes with the drama of Rachel giving birth (Gen. 35:16-19): "They set out from Bethel; but when they were still some distance short of Ephrat, Rachel was in childbirth, and she had hard labor…. But as she breathed her last-for she was dying- she named him Ben-oni; but his father called him Benjamin. Thus Rachel died." The dying is conflated with Rachel's hard labor and is not presented as a separate process. The first recorded awareness of the coming of death is with Aaron: (Num. 20:25-28): "Take Aaron and his son Eleazar and bring them up on Mount Hor. Strip Aaron of his vestments and put them on his son Eleazar. There Aaron shall be gathered unto the dead. Moses did as the Lord commanded. They ascended Mount Hor in the sight of the whole community …and Aaron died

there on the summit of the mountain." Any terror Aaron may have experienced at the naked forced march toward death is not recorded.

Of Moshe we read (Deut. 31:16): "The Lord said to Moses: You are soon to lie with your fathers. This people will thereupon go astray after alien gods in their midst...they will forsake and break My covenant..." Moshe's reactions to his imminent death and to learning that the mission of forty years of his life may have been for nought are not recorded. Later (Deut. 34:6-7) we learn: "[God] buried him in the valley in the land of Moav..." "Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died; his eyes were undimmed and his vigor unabated." Moshe goes knowingly to his death but he also knows for a surety he goes to the bosom of God and he goes with his full faculties and bodily integrity.

This is no dying I know. Where is written the chemo nausea and the false hope of recovery and the swollen legs and the unsteady gait and the struggles to the toilet and the need for so much help and the decisions about antibiotics and DNR and the periods of confusion and the worries about money and the unrelenting pain and the wrenching loss of home for hospice? That...all that is written in the flesh of God's children.

There is a reason why the ancient Greeks and Romans took so seriously Aeschylus' statement in *Agamemnon* : "Call no man happy before he is dead" and the Stoics regarded all of life as preparation for death. There is a fear on the part of every dying person to some degree that the way in which they approach their decline and death may affirm or undermine, celebrate or betray their entire foregoing life. For some the inescapable prospect of death provides an imprimatur for the opening line of Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus:* "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest...are games..." Hamlet would seem to agree:

> To be, or not to be--that is the question:
> Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
> The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune
> Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
> And by opposing end them.

All the dying are tempted, whether they know to put it in these terms or not, to say, as did Job's wife when he was afflicted with every sort of life tragedy, including grievous physical disease: "Do you still cling to your integrity? Curse God and die!"

Can it really be that to the individual or to the loved ones of the individual the manner of the end of life can undo all the many years that preceded that death? Allow me to make what at first may seem a strange comparison. In Deuteronomy 28 we have a list of the dire curses of the Tochacha which may befall the Israelites if they betray the teachings of Moses, one of the curses being "...you shall eat your own issue, the flesh of your sons and daughters...." You would think this would be the culminating curse of the series, for what could be more terrible than this,

but the curses actually conclude with what seems anti-climactic in the extreme: "The Lord will send you back to Egypt in galleys, by a route which I told you you should not see again." That is, the ultimate curse is the negation of all of Jewish history and purpose, the loss of all personal direction and meaning, the loss of all that made sense and provided cohesion. As Camus wrote: "The gods had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor." The seeming randomness of illness, the inevitability of death and the uncertainty of the manner of dying threaten to negate the whole of life as absurd.

The most shameful episode in Aaron's life was that of the Golden Calf, about which Moses scathingly observed (Ex.32:25) "...the people were out of control-since Aaron had let them get out of control-so that they were a menace..." The people were out of control from fear that Moses, their leader and protector, would not return and they were abandoned to die in a wilderness. By way of contrast then, Aaron's most admirable episode was surely that recorded in Numbers 17 when, after the revolt of Korach and his band and after the Israelites speaking against Moshe and Aaron, when God unleashes a plague to annihilate the Israelites, we read:"Then Moses said to Aaron, 'Take the fire pan ...For wrath has gone forth from the Lord: the plague has begun!' Aaron...ran to the midst of the congregation, where the plague had begun among the people. He put on the incense and made expiation for the people; he stood between the dead and the living until the plague was checked." To stand, and stand fast, between the dead and the living until the plague of the panicking fear of death is checked is a most daunting mission. All of those who know they are dying stand between the living and the dead but not all can check the plague. To feel the plague is to say with poets "I had not known that death had undone so many." But all who breathe stand between the living and the dead, only not so close as those with a terminal diagnosis. As Kierkegaard wrote: "Despair is the sickness unto death. For dying means that it is all over, but dying the death means to live to experience death, and if for a single instant this experience is possible, it is tantamount to experiencing it forever."

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross was a Swiss psychiatrist who worked at the Pritzker school of Medicine of the University of Chicago where she wrote the seminal work *On Death and Dying* in 1969 in which she formulated five stages of dying: denial ("It's not me!); anger ("Why me?); bargaining ("Maybe not me, if..."); depression ("It is me!"); and acceptance ("A resigned me."). This was never presented as a rigid sequence all of those faced with dying must go through and few attain a reconciled acceptance as Kubler-Ross understood it.

Nathan Englander, at an evening event held at Symphony Space in January of 2012 hosted by Nora Ephron, ill then with cancer herself and now also gone, publicly acknowledged Deborah as his main teacher in the art of writing. His first published short story, *The Twenty-Seventh Man*, which is about the Yiddish poets murdered by Stalin and the assumption of the mantle of artist, student and teacher, benefited most from Deborah's hand. Nathan had converted the story into a play which was originally to have opened at the Public Theater in 2011 but, due to various production and scheduling problems, did not actually open until the fall of 2012. Between the time of the final form of the original script and the actual opening of the

show, Deborah fell ill and died. Apparently, in the interim, Nathan had revised the script because in the final scene, very near the end of the play, when the senior Yiddish poet Zunser is in his cell along with the others facing imminent death by firing squad, he suddenly speaks the words which Deborah had actually uttered: "Why me? Why me? Why have I been so fortunate in life? Why have I been blessed with such wonderful children, such wonderful family? Why have I been so rich with friends?"

Deborah's statement, a complete inversion and rejection of the Kubler-Ross stage of anger made when death was nigh, represents an absolute stand against the plague. To stand between the living and the dead and know it, is to be naked of denial and Deborah bore it all with dignity and equanimity. Emily in *Our Town* asks: "Oh, earth you are too wonderful for anybody to realize you. Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it...every, every minute?" The short answer to Emily's question is "no." The long answer to Emily's question is "no." "Every, every minute!" But Deborah came close well or ill and she enabled her friends to gain a glimpse of that view of life. Knowing Deborah in health and the opportunity to be of help to Deborah in illness lent meaning and urgency and appreciation to the lives of those who knew and aided her. The brotherhood and sisterhood of those who checked her PICC line and changed her IV bags and took her to medical appointments and shopped for her benefited immensely. Deborah did not flinch from being Deborah throughout her ten month ordeal nor the years lived before. Up until the end she was still trying to decide on a poem to be read at Liora Hoffman's wedding. Perhaps an appropriate choice would have included: "... at my back I always hear, time's winged chariot hurrying near."

In Camus' novel *The Plague* Dr. Rieux organizes the resistance to the epidemic of plague which has besieged the city of Oran and resulted in its quarantine. He has no illusions about the ultimate outcome, but Dr. Rieux and some others have chosen to take a stand against the plague. About this Dr. Rieux says: "I have realized that we all have plague, and I have lost my peace. I only know that one must do what one can to cease being plague-stricken, and that's the only way in which we can hope for some peace or, failing that, a decent death." Dr. Rieux loses his great friend Tarrou to the plague of which he says: "...he had lived at Tarrou's side, and Tarrou had died this evening without their friendship's having had time to enter fully into the life of either. Tarrou had 'lost the match,' as he put it. But what had he, Rieux, won? No more than the experience of having known plague and remembering it, of having known friendship and remembering it. So all a man could win in the conflict between plague and life was knowledge and memories. But Tarrou, perhaps, would have called that winning the match." "They knew now that if there is one thing one can always yearn for and sometimes attain, it is human love." "...the one thing that depended on them solely."

For Deborah, all there ever was, was not the diagnostics and chemo and critical care, but the love of family and friends which enabled her to face death with endurance, grace and equanimity. A year ago, on her last birthday, when Deborah and several of her friends gathered for dinner at a restaurant the night before the final biopsy report on the recurrent lymph nodes

would be back, we all knew the outcome but Deborah had a marvelous time and we, because of Deborah, had a marvelous time. Is that denial or simply how life is lived? The Latin origin of the word "doctor" means teacher, not physician. In life and in death, Deborah was the doctor and I the student.

Exodus 13: "Now the Israelites went armed out of the land of Egypt. And Moshe took with him the bones of Joseph…" I submit that the remembrance implicit in the bones of Joseph's arms were the true and better arms "against a sea of troubles." Deborah's stock-piled soap bars have been used up, the books I have of hers will tatter, the CDs will scratch and her easy chair will wear out. Deborah was the only person on earth who called my son Etan her "honey-bunny" and that is gone forever. Deborah and I had plans to push baby carriages side by side in Riverside Park and for her, in retirement, to come to our home for dinner a few times a week. That future is foreclosed. As Dina observed, it was ironic that Deborah would have been the perfect person to discuss Deborah's funeral, or anything else, with and that is gone forever. I have no intention of deleting Deborah's e-mail address from my computer nor her telephone number from my cell nor her love from my heart. All we have left to console us is Philip Larkin's insistence: "Our almost-instinct almost true: What will survive of us is love."

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April 6, 2013

PARSHAT SHEMINI

Perhaps in an effort to stimulate weary eyes, what I find exciting these days when we read the Torah's middle parshiyot is to grasp how the text sets up the personality development of the Jewish world — shaping us into something like the people we are today. When we spoke about the building of the Mishkan described in Parhat T'rumah a few weeks ago, we noted the community priorities built into that set of very early ritual commandments — emphasis on workmanship, intricacy, detail, time commitment, dignity of presentation while avoiding ostentation, resilience over fixed permanency. It is no accident that these priorities were formatted in the wilderness before the people reached Eretz Yisrael where inevitable features of landedness and position would have suffocated these vital characteristics.

Today's Parsha Shemini drives these themes even further and firmer. Nadav and Avihu die after failing to act Jewish. They fashioned a fire themselves rather than through Hashem's prescription. Having been fixtures assisting their father Aaron in many public rituals, they assumed that Hashem was ready to play favorites by accepting their freelanced sacrifice. They took ceremonyl to be about them rather than the full community. The text very quickly wipes out their arrogance and, while continuing to allow for priesthood through family descent, warns Aaron and his surviving sons to be very careful in realizing that their status comes out of commandment and duty rather than entitlement, that being true to ha'shem is more important than exercising power.

The laws of Kashrut recounted in Shemini gigantically reinforce this approach in achieving Jewish personality. Eating too is about intricacy and detail. In this essential part of life we are again commanded to stop and think about what we are doing. We cannot be grabbers — for us no consumption of roadkill and the equivalent. Jewish people are compelled to become professional food preparers and deliberative eaters — the full community sharing this unique form of intimate restraint. While there is no particular rationale set out for the laws of kashrut, it is the Torah's genius to provide this vital means of preserving Jewish self-respect and particularity.

As a matter of personal observation which may be agreed with, or not, I thought to finish on a note of caution combined with hope from these themes. Of all the remarkable traits reflected for the Jewish community through our text, the most difficult for us to sustain — as shown by our history — is the admonition that we walk humbly: that we not play favorites, place power before truth, and fail to regard all members of the community equally. The original break away represented by Christianity seems to have had a lot to do with the chronic failure of Jewish communities in Eretz Yisrael to perform in accordance with these early set standards. For instance, we can read — with some embarrassment — passages in the New Testament book of James denouncing the practice of favoritism. And the same kind of criticism has resonance for Jewish communities in more recent times. But our history also teaches that we can return to fundamental principles — that the personality bestowed upon us so long ago remains vibrant for those who aspire to it.

Parshat Shemini

Shabbat shalom—or gut Shabbos, as the case may be.

This week's parsha is one of the most practical in the entire Torah, and is perhaps the one that most occupies our daily thoughts, because it lays the groundwork for the observance of kashrut. I have no intention of talking about that. We've all just spent a whole week obsessing over what we can eat.

No—I'm going to do exactly what you'd expect of me, and discuss the section of the parsha that has no practical relevance, and about which we do our best not to think. I'm going straight for Nadav and Avihu. A few years ago, Henry Bean gave a brilliant drash about this story, which he sees as fundamental to an honest, mature confrontation with Jewish theology. God is inherently and unavoidably dangerous, so the fear of Heaven, *yirat Shamayim,* is everybody's business. Put it this way: when George Harrison sings, "My sweet Lord, I really want to feel you," the correct response is, "No, man, you really don't."

I don't know if I've got anything substantial to add. The best I can do is confess my bafflement.

Which is, if you'll allow me, your bafflement as well. The basic fact about this story is that nobody understands it. What, exactly, happened to Nadav and Avihu? Did they die automatically, as if they'd done the priestly equivalent of touching the third rail? Or did an offended God mete out punishment for a transgression? If so, what had they done wrong? Were they impatient, drunk, presumptuous, ritually sloppy? Or was their death by divine fire actually a privilege, as Rashi suggests? I've spent a week combing through the rabbinic sources, and some modern scholarship as well, and have concluded that nobody can agree, and it's useless to try to

solve the mystery. Maybe the point, if any, is that the deaths *are* a mystery. This is one of many cases in storytelling where structure predominates over content. The main thing you get is the experience of a sudden, violent reversal. The enigma behind the event amplifies the shock. And so, too, does the enigma of Moses's statement to Aaron in the aftermath: "See, this is what God meant when God said, I will be sanctified in those who are close to Me, and I will be glorified before all the people." Aaron heard this and was silent—maybe because he no longer had any idea what his brother was talking about.

I don't understand what's going on here. But I can describe the scene that confuses me. And maybe that will be a way into some level of meaning.

So: The Israelites have just experienced the most awe-inspiring and joyful moment since Sinai—perhaps even *more* awesome and joyful. At Sinai, they couldn't bear the sound of the divine voice and ran as far as they could. Here, the divine presence settles right in their midst. They get to live with it, day by day. And it's active—they can see it flare out and consume the sacrifice on the altar. Who gets the unimaginable honor of being the agent of this revelation? It's no longer Moses, as it was at Sinai. After the first seven days of consecrating the Mikdash, Moses hands the proceedings over to Aaron. Freshly anointed and dressed in sparkling new finery, Aaron gets to be the one to intercede with a living God who is right *there*.

And then the living God fries Aaron's two oldest sons. The same fire that was the cause of worshipful joy is now, in the blink of an eye, the cause of deepest grief. I don't want to imagine the aftermath in any detail. What I want to dwell on is Aaron staring at this terrible scene and then realizing he couldn't leave. In effect, he was a captive of the horror—and what was worse, he wasn't allowed to mourn, either. No loosening of the hair, no rending of the garments, or else he might inflame God again. Moses spoke his cryptic sentence—maybe words

of comfort, maybe not—and Aaron stood impassive, silent, showing no grief. He stayed put, and obeyed, right until the moment when Moses cried out in anger and alarm that the sin offering of the goat had not been eaten. Aaron was absolutely forbidden to let personal grief interfere with his ritual duty.

That was when he finally found his voice—which is strange, because Moses had always been the one with the thick tongue, and Aaron had been the talker. Now, trapped in this place and prevented from expressing his emotions, Aaron nevertheless found it possible to say (I'm interpreting freely), "I did everything right, and look what happened to me. And now you think God wants to watch me eat dinner?"

Which put an end to the conversation, and to the ritual. Moses and Aaron had just spent days on end following obsessively detailed instructions—but the directions had run out, and the brothers realized they no longer knew what to do. Actually, I think Moses had known from the moment Nadav and Avihu died. There was something improvisatory, and panicked, in the orders he kept barking at Aaron and the others—always *his* orders, without God's pulling him aside to have a word. Aaron at last told him it was enough. And then it was Moses's turn to consent in silence.

Again, I don't know what to do with this text. It leads me nowhere—no doubt because I'm a common person who has no experience with ritual fire pans, or animal sacrifice, and can't imagine himself approaching anywhere near the divine. The rabbinic interpretations give me no reliable insight, and the plain meaning offers no ideas about how I ought to live.

So I'm going to do something illicit with this story and remove its supernatural element. I'm going to ask what the human situation looks like, the situation you get if you don't moralize the text or look for mystical clues. The answer is, you're looking at a picture of two brothers—

brothers who love each other but maybe sometimes feel a little rivalry—stuck in a confined space, surrounded by death and the detritus of chaos, unable to express their grief, and uncertain of what they ought to do next.

Now, that's something I know about. In fact, I think many of us have been to that place, or somewhere like it. So let me play out the human situation a little more and tell you a different story about a father and his sons. It's a story that's entirely mundane, but it does have a little mystery of its own.

I've been thinking about it because this past week would have been my father's birthday. I'm going to tell you just a little about his life, and then about something that happened after his death.

He was born in Chicago in 1919 and grew up in the Depression, in a family that had very little. When he graduated from high school, there was no possibility of his going to college. At 18, he went on the road. He took a job that required him to travel around the country, and he sent home whatever money he could. To locate it, this was about a dozen years and one world war before I came into the picture.

That's the background. The story is that after his death, and after my mother's death, my brother and I found a few albums of photographs we hadn't seen before. One of these snapshots had the word "Oklahoma" written on the back. On the front was an image of our father at age 18 or 19, standing with a big smile in the middle of a family of Black farmers, with his arms around them.

As you may imagine, my brother and I wanted to know what this was all about. More than twenty years later, we still want to know. But our father is dead, our mother is dead, anybody who could have told us anything about this photograph is dead. The mystery remains

impenetrable, and my brother and I have to remain mute before our loss. We're not grieving—because, in this flabbergasting case of a young man we hadn't known, we can't comprehend who exactly we would mourn. Besides, there's something funny about this surprise. At the same time, though, my brother and I would like to find some way forward, and the path does not exist.

And yet we *do* manage to go forward, all of us, even though we understand nothing and have no instructions. Which is what Aaron and Moses did, too. At a certain point, after the deaths of Nadav and Avihu, Aaron and Moses left the Tent of Meeting, just because time had passed. The time had solved nothing, but it continued, and so did they. They carried on with whatever they had to do at the moment. And a while later, when God flamed out again—this time in the aftermath of Korach's rebellion, when a plague started to rage through the camp—Aaron and Moses acted impulsively with no direction at all. If anything, they went *against* procedure. Aaron took his incense pan and broke the line he'd been told to observe between holy and profane, pure and impure. He carried a fire that had not been commanded out of the Mikdash and into the middle of the camp—and instead of causing death, he saved countless lives.

How is this possible? What sense does it make? Again, we have no clue. I think the only way we can come close to understanding it is to accept what Heschel said, that the Torah tells us very little about God but a lot about people.

Here is what I've learned from these readings about being human. Sometimes you plan and do everything right, and even so you wind up devastated. Sometimes you improvise blindly, and it works out. And then there are times when you wonder if somewhere in Tulsa there's an elderly Black man named Klawans who's your brother.

Shabbat shalom.

Dvar Torah-Metzora-April 5, 2014

In this Torah portion we read: "This shall be the ritual for a metzora, a leper, at the time he is to be cleansed. …If the priest sees that the metzora has been healed of his scaly affection, the priest shall order two live clean birds…be brought for him who is to be cleansed. The priest shall order one of the birds slaughtered over fresh water in an earthen vessel; and he shall…dip …the live bird in the blood of the bird that was slaughtered…He shall then sprinkle it seven times on him who is to be cleansed of the eruption and cleanse him; and he shall set the live bird free in the open country…."

I understand that many ancient practices, especially those surrounding tzara'at, which we have come to call leprosy, and priestly rituals, especially those involving sacrifices, which the Torah prescribes often seem remote and off-putting to us. At least the slaughtered bird corresponds to what we are accustomed to hearing within the sacrificial system but the other component seems particularly odd. The live bird is stained with the blood of the sacrificed other and then is set free. We can understand killing the one but we are baffled at letting the stained bird fly away. Is it "free as a bird?"

To my knowledge, the only place in Tanach itself where this procedure is at all alluded to is in Jeremiah 12:7-9 where God is speaking about a wicked Israel: "I have forsaken My house, I have cast off My heritage; I have given the dearly beloved of My soul into the hand of her enemies. My heritage is become unto Me as a lion in the forest; She hath uttered her voice against Me; Therefore have I hated her. Is My heritage unto Me as a painted bird of prey? Are the birds of prey against her round about?..."

"A painted bird"? This is the source of the title of Jerzy Kosinski's novel *The Painted Bird*, which he initially presented as semi-autobiographical, in which is described the attempt of an ambiguously Jewish boy during World War II, wandering alone through the countryside and small towns of Poland, to survive the ignorance, attacks and general bestiality of the peasants. The novel was eventually recognized as being entirely fictional, and virulently anti-Polish, with parts possibly having been plagiarized. At one point in the novel, a professional bird catcher is described as painting a captured bird with various colors and setting it free so that when it returns to its kin, it is attacked. Here Kosinski likens the vagabond boy to the painted bird being attacked when it tries to re-enter society. For Kosinski after much success, exposure and further success, including with his novel and film with Peter Sellers, *Being There*, which concerned a simple-minded man who is accepted by the media as a policy guru, always dogged by controversy, Kosinski ended as a suicide at the age of fifty-seven.

A fuller elaboration of the painted bird ritual comes from Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. (p.53, p.55) Mc Murphy has just gotten himself transferred to an Oregon state mental hospital, having faked mental illness in order to escape the rigors of a prison labor gang. During his first experience of what is called group therapy, he observes Nurse Ratched,

known as Big Nurse, manipulating and threatening the acute patients, the outcasts of society, into revealing their deepest secrets and attacking each other, after which "Their faces burned with a shame like they … just woke up to the fact they have been played for suckers again." Of this Mc Murphy says: 'Is this the usual *pro*-cedure for these Group Ther'py shindigs? Bunch of chickens at a peckin' party?"…"… I'll just explain it to you." McMurphy raises his voice; though he doesn't look at the other Acutes listening behind him, it's them he's talking to. "The flock gets sight of a spot of blood on some chicken and they all go to *peckin*' at it, see, till they rip the chicken to shreds, blood and bones and feathers. But usually a couple of the *flock* gets spotted in the fracas, then it's their turn. And a few more gets spots and gets pecked to death, and more and more. Oh, a peckin' party can wipe out the whole flock in a matter of a few hours, buddy, I seen it." McMurphy relates the men of the misbegotten group misusing revealing stories about themselves and attacking each other to chickens bloodying and killing each other, because they are "painted birds."

Often we are amused and fascinated by what is usually referred to as "the Rabbinic imagination" in which the Rabbis seem to provide a far-fetched interpretation of what would otherwise appear straightforward. In this way tzara'at was taken to be a punishment for lashon harah based on Numbers 12: "…Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman he had married: 'He married a Cushite woman!' They said, 'Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Has [God] not spoken through us as well?'" God defends Moses and "…As the [Lord's] cloud withdrew from the Tent, there was Miriam stricken with snow-white scales." Rather than seeing this as a Rabbinic indulgence, it might be more accurate to see this as an attempt on their parts to take a practice already obsolete and anachronistic for them and rework it as a vital warning against a practice that was very prevalent and always would be, lashon harah, which the Rabbis correctly understood to be a very socially corrosive force potentially destructive of community. As Rambam states in Mishneh Torah-Hilchot De'ot (p.138, 7:2): "Who is a gossiper? One who collects information and [then] goes from person to person, saying: "This is what so and so said," "This is what I heard about so and so." Even if the statements are true, they bring about the destruction of the world." Though the term Cushite would suggest a woman from Ethiopia, implying Moses took a second wife, some of the Rabbis and ibn Ezra take this to mean Cushan, a Midianite tribe, and so this would refer to Tzipporah, whose name means "bird." Also, it has been said that the gossip flits from person to person as a bird does from branch to branch

The only other ritual I know of in which two sacrificial animals are selected but one is slaughtered while the other is set free to endure a solitary existence and then death is that of the scapegoat sent into the wilderness. In the Avodah of Yom Kippur we read of "the (live) goat selected for banishment" which is "sent out" to a "harsh desert" to remain alone and later to fall or be pushed down a ravine. The scapegoat of Yom Kippur, which carries the sins of the people, suggests that the painted bird carries the sins of the individual. This would seem to be confirmed by our parsha (Lev. 14:18) where we read: "The priest shall take some of the blood of the guilt

offering, and the priest shall put it on the ridge of the right ear of him who is being cleansed, and on the thumb of the right hand, and the big toe of the right foot…Thus the priest shall make expiation for him before the Lord. The priest shall then offer the sin offering and make expiation for the one being cleansed of his uncleanness." This ritual of blood applied to the human body which cleanses the metzora of guilt and sin, directly resembles the ritual by which Aaron and his sons are consecrated as priests and through it the metzora is welcomed back into society rather than attacked.

The baleful effects of gossip must have been obvious in all cultures because the Hasidic tale in which a rabbi likens the impossibility of undoing the effects of the spread of gossip to trying to gather back together all the feathers of a pillow which had been shaken out upon the winds finds echoes in book 12 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in which elements of social dynamics are represented as gods:

"There is a far-off place at the center of earth and sea and sky where those three realms abut. There **Rumor** lives in her lofty castle perched on a mountaintop. Her house has a thousand open windows, and the entranceways are countless, but nowhere is there a door for servants to close. The world's sights and sounds all come here, words, images, gestures swirling together by night and day …In the halls, crowds of apparently busy people are coming and going on various urgent errands, but along the way they exchange rumors, falsehoods and truths jumbled together but all passed on from one to another. As it travels along, a story takes on a life of its own, growing, changing, reversing its implication, as Error embellishes here and there, Credulity simplifies, Generosity touches up and improves wherever she can, or Panic darkens the palette to suggest a world more in keeping with what she has always believed. Rumor herself attends to whatever is written or said, in heaven, at sea, or on land, grist for her mill of stories." (p.239)

We are, Minyan M'at is, a davening-rationalized extended friendship circle within a larger community. We are devoted members of AC but we do not have to apologize for a greater connection born of greater contact and affiliation here. I would liken this to Rambam's statement in Mishneh Torah-Zrayim 8:13 regarding legitimate concentric circles of tzedakah responsibilities: "A man's poor relative has priority over any person; the poor in his own household have priority over the poor in his town; the poor in his town have priority over the poor of another town, as it is written: "Open your hand to your brother, to your needy, to your poor in your land." (Dev. 15:11) God told Moses, after the deaths of Nadav and Avihu: "Through those near to Me I show Myself holy" (Lev. 10:3). Might it not be that through our contact with those nearest to us, family, friends, community we demonstrate whether we are prepared to treat each other in a holy fashion? For our purposes today, I would define tzara'at as the consequences for the individual whose behavior lessens community.

There have been so many deaths in the community recently. We experienced how attending funerals, attending shiva minyanim, providing meals and visiting mourners serve as forces countering the centrifugal pull of indifference and self-centeredness. The Rabbis observed that the parah adumah, the red heifer, which served as an antidote to contamination acquired through contact with the dead thus returning a person to the community, made amends for its child the egal zahav, the golden calf, which had nearly destroyed the community. Who could have understood, before experiencing it, how attending to the mitzvah of menachem aveilim undoes the contamination of the dread of death and undoes the uncleanness of the desolation of loss and undoes the plague of the threat of isolation for the community as well as the mourner? Any form of comforting a mourner, in the doing of which we are usually our best selves, may serve as expiation for those times of which we are less than proud of ourselves. In comforting a mourner, the flock rushes to support the wounded bird rather than turning on it and each other.

I say, without irony and with only a little exaggeration, that Herodotus' statement about the Greek couriers during the Persian war, "Neither snow, nor rain, nor heat, nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds," applies to you in your menachem aveilim duties. M'at has had people appear for minyanim in actual blizzards and torrential downpours and unbearable heat and often people barely identifiable by the bereaved families have shown up for them. Those of this community who have had the misfortune to lose a loved one have had the good fortune to feel loved and cared for and this has an indelible effect. Those who put themselves out for others know they emerge feeling rewarded and this magic never fades with repetition. We all could have had other lives, other spouses, other friends and other communities in this life, but we banish that thought, which can lead to a life of flitting around like a bird, by saying "this is my beloved" and here I make my stand.

"Levaya" we call the funeral- we accompany the dead to their rest, we accompany the mourners through their sadness, we accompany our fellow shiva attendees home, we accompany each other on Shabbos at M'at, we accompany each other at meals and smachot and we accompany each other through to our ends…that is how you get through this life. Community is not a theory, it is an action. The majority of people out there have nothing like this and don't even know how they suffer…or maybe they do since it is a cold world out there, in any season, and the lone bird and the lone goat know it. In the ancient world, tzara'at was dreaded not primarily because it was seen as a disease but because the metzora was cast out to survive as best he could. In Leviticus 13:46 we are told [the metzora]"…he shall dwell apart."

Sartre's *No Exit* presents three people sealed in a bare room for eternity which they take to be Hell. At first they assume that the confinement itself is Hell but later realize the pitiless torture they put each other through regarding their pasts and their false outlooks on those pasts, with no possibility of succor or change or redemption, their "pecking party," represents their Hell, so that at the end of the play, one character famously says, "Hell is other people." If that is so, then, I submit, under different circumstances, so must Heaven be.

Kant observed that "Nothing perfectly straight can ever be made from the bent timber of humanity." That is true, very true. Though it may be a little wobbly, look at this beautiful thing we have built!

Howard L. Berkowitz

D'var Torah 04 02 0222

Marcia Pally

In honor of Michael Paley, I feel obliged to tell you that the dermatological diagnostic manual we just read in *parashat* Tazria is not my favorite *parasha*. In fact, my drash isn't about the *parasha*--or about any *parasha*. It may be about Passover, which is coming up, and the exile of the ancient Israelites in Egypt. Or it may be about the ethics that the entire Bible teaches us. Actually, it's certainly about ethics, and given the situation in Ukraine, Yemen, Myanmar, Ethiopia, our own southern border, etc. it is about what exile in particular teaches us about ethics. To explore this, I'm going to draw on the work of Emnanuel Levinas, so we can begin with what sort ethics Levinas was aiming at.

For Levinas, each person is unique, and each person's unique identity is formed by covenantal commitment to the "face" of the other—interestingly, not commitment to God. "My very uniqueness," Levinas wrote, "lies in the responsibility for the other man."[1] Two ideas are key here: responsibility and hospitality—opening one's resources to another. On Levinas's view, nearing *God* happens through responsibility and hospitality to other *persons*. Levinas writes, "To follow the Most-High is also to know that nothing is greater than to approach one's neighbour."[2] He also notes that God, "approaches precisely through this relay to the neighbor—binding men among one another with obligation, each one answering for the lives of all the others." This "relay to the neighbor" is "the highest possible theological knowledge one can have."[3]

Hospitality, obligation to the other, is realized by fulfilling not abstract rules but one's specific responsibilities *in situ*, in the place and situation you're in. *Personal* responsibility and hospitality are what makes one a person. Our commitments are determined by the particular needs of the others whom we face. And, Levinas stresses, we may not erase them by projecting our own expectations upon them.

If this responsibility and hospitality is the kernel of Levinasian ethics, what's exile? Marcia and Cecilia Sá Cavalcante Schuback, in "Memory in Exile," note that exile is rooted in "after-ness," in living after another existence that was "real life." Exile is, they write, "existence after having existed. It is an after-existence" a "post-condition."[4]

I think this is exactly… backwards. Exile is not a *post*-existence with a break between past and present. To the contrary, the experience of exile requires memory--not the end of one period that we are now "post" but rather the *continuity* of the past in the mind of the exiled rememberer. It is the vividness, value, and emotional *presence* of *what cannot now be made present* that gives exile its bite.

Exile is living always *in reference* to a remembered, longed for time or place from which one was removed and to which one wishes to return. It can be recollected but it cannot made present until the exile is lifted.

So we've got Levinasian ethics (responsibility for hospitality to the other) and we've got exile (living in reference to a remembered time that cannot now be present). They come together

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[1] Levinas, Emmanuel (1994) "Revelation in the Jewish Tradition," in *Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Readings and Lectures,* translated by G. Mole, pp. 129-50, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 142.
[2] Levinas, Emmanuel (1994) *Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Readings and Lectures.* New York: Bloomsbury, 142.
[3] Levinas, Emmanuel (1994) *In the Time of the Nations,* translated by. M. Smith, London: Athlone, 171.
[4] Schuback, Marcia Sá Cavalcante, and Cecilia Sá Cavalcante Schuback (2017) "Memory in Exile," *Research in Phenomenology* 47, no. 2, 175–89.

in Levinas's chapter on ערי מקלט, "Cities of Refuge," (CoR) in his book *Beyond the Verse.*[5] These are cities are where manslaughterers, who did not intend harm, may take refuge to escape avenging vigilante families. Levinas notes two things about refuge cities: (i) they are places of the half-guilty--the manslaughterers after all *did* commit harm—and (ii) they are not only refuge but also punishment for that unintended harm. The form of punishment is exile from one's former life. Manslaughterers, to stay safe, must remain in the refuge city.

Levinas holds that both features, half-guilt and exile, help to explain his ethics. He holds that CoRs are like the affluent West, which too is responsible in mediated ways for the "agonies" and deaths of the world's poor. Though not directly intended by the affluent of today's developed economies, their very affluence rests on the back of past colonialism, economies of extraction, and on current systems of exploitation and environmental degradation. Like the manslaughterer, we are at least half-guilty. Levinas writes,

> In Western society—free and civilized, but without social equality and a rigorous social justice—is it absurd to wonder whether the advantages available to the rich… are not the cause, somewhere, of someone's agony?[6]

Moreover, the poor might one day take to the streets and have at the rich, like the vigilante families of an unintentionally killed person. Are the rich not now living like the half-guilty in CoRs, hoping for protection? Levinas asks, "does not all this make our cities cities of refuge or cities of exiles?"[7] By pointing to the analogy of half-guilt and exile, Levinas hopes to teach his ethics to the West and wealthy so that in the future, none are harmed, all offer hospitality, none live in half-guilt, and none are in exile.

I think this is exactly… half-right. It's right about the guilt part, not the exile part. The affluent West is more than half guilty for the exploitation of others, past and present, that affords us our affluence. But we are not in exile. While a few of the wealthy today may live in exile (owing to war, politics, etc.), the vast majority live either in their homelands or in *chosen* places of residence. Indeed, having the freedom and wherewithal to live where you want is one of the privileges of affluence.

In short, much as Levinas tries to use CoRs, half-guilt, and exile *together* as an analogy and tool to teach ethics, they may not be fully helpful. I'd like to try something else: let's look at ethics through the lens of exile and half-guilt—but *uncoupled* from CoRs. Let's look at exile and half-guilt alone. It's not that *we* are in exile as the manslaughterers in CoRs are. It's that the *events* of exile and half-guilt are key in thinking about ethics *because* exile puts both refugee and host in situations where they may wrong each other. Where they are half guilty. Exile puts a spotlight on the ways in which host and refugee—and much more so, the host--may be put in circumstances where they think self-absorbedly and harm each other. Exile is a problem-set for thinking about ethics.

So let's look at what exile teaches us about half guilt and ethics. Refugees--to survive with few resources--may cheat on government forms to get food or housing assistance, lie on documents for work permits or driver's licenses, run a business on the underground market, or participate in gang violence, with substantial harm to the host. They may be criminal but only half guilty as these wrongs may be the outcomes of the squeezed conditions of exile. The host in turn is half guilty—or more--for the inhospitable squeeze of refugee life (i) by prodding

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[5] Levinas, Emmanuel (1994) *Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Readings and Lectures.* New York: Bloomsbury.
[6] Levinas, Emmanuel (1994) *Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Readings and Lectures.* New York: Bloomsbury, 40.
[7] Levinas, Emmanuel (1994) *Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Readings and Lectures.* New York: Bloomsbury, 40.

conditions that create refugees (climate change, war), (ii) by taking advantage of vulnerable and desperate people, paying them low wages, employing them in unsafe conditions, or failing to provide health care, etc., or (iii) by retaining a legal and political system that makes refugee survival harsh, sometimes impossible.

Three biblical narratives illustrate the half-guilt that exile sets for host and refugee. They are each practice for thinking about ethics. Genesis 12 tells of Avram, who, in famine-induced exile in Egypt, pretends his wife Sarai is his sister and sells her to Pharaoh, violating Sarai (even by First Temple ethical standards) and causing illness to Pharoah's court. One may say he is half guilty for selling off his wife since he did so in fear for his life. The Egyptian host is also at least half guilty for the practice of killing off refugee husbands to abscond with their wives, thus giving Avram the need to deceive and sell Sarai. Each has wronged the other under the circumstances that exile brings.

Example two: In Genesis 16, the maidservant Hagar, in exile from her native Egypt, is given by the barren Sarai to Avram. Hagar becomes pregnant and mocks the barren Sarai, who retaliates by treating Hagar cruelly, causing Hagar to flee. Again, in the exile event, host and refugee wrong each other. Though Sarai's barrenness is not Hagar's fault, taunting the miserable Sarai is. And in turn, abusing the servant-girl, dependent on her masters for survival, is Sarai's considerable wrongdoing. Third example: when in exile from his homeland and hiding out in his uncle Laban's house, Jacob is deceived by Laban--whom he in turn deceives. Jacob is only half guilty for his acts of deceit since the host Laban takes advantage of him, and the exiled Jacob uses what deceptions he can to cheat Laban in return. In this situation of exile, each fails hospitality to the "face" of the other

Each of these narratives invites us to ponder the positions of host and refugee under the power imbalances inherent in exile. Each is a practice-exercise in doing so. If in Levinas's ethics, human identity and bond with God emerge from the "obligation, each one answering for the lives of all the others," in the predicament of exile, both host and refugee may find themselves "answering" for only themselves, in self-absorption, violating hospitality. And on Levinas's view, if hospitality—generosity, opening resources to the other—fails, one violates one's unique personhood *and* relationship with God. For God comes through the "relay to the neighbour."

Levinas's insight is that the circumstances of exile are an opportunity to think about power imbalances, about thinking self-absorbedly. And they are an opportunity to think about hospitality and our obligation to the "face" of the other.

President Biden has said that this year, the US will take in 100,000 Ukrainian refugees. In a few weeks, I'll be in Berlin to teach for the semester. The buses taking refugees from the train station to refugee quarters run at the end of my block. I'm asking myself how I will take responsibility for people who are now exiles in part because of thirty years of Western gloating about winning the Cold War and neglect of circumstances within Russia. Those circumstances are in the main not the West's doing. They are our half-guilt. We are, in mediated ways, half guilty for these latest exiles.

It turns out that ethics is not solely in the philosophy books but what we do or don't do when we get up in the morning, each day—in my case, about people at the end of my Berlin block. Shabbat shalom.

I would like to dedicate this devar torah to two people. To the late R. Baruch Bokser, an inspired teacher of mine who died this past July, as many of you know, after a courageous struggle against cancer. Many teachers share their erudition with you. We expect that of them. But, Professor Bokser gave me something far more profound and lasting than merely his prodigious knowledge. He gave me -- and many of his other students -- the tools with which we could approach the great classical texts of Rabbinic Judaism on our own. His menschlikhkayt, humanity, and his great passion for our Tradition were unusual. He is missed.

And to another inspired teacher, my husband Gary Dreiblatt, the prophetic factor in our particular equation.

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We just heard a detailed description of a ritual of purification. We watched once again, in our imaginations, the expelling of the goat for Azazel. The entire parashah is devoted to a painstakingly detailed description of a ritual, which, with its purging, blood sprinkling, immersing, and the carefully orchestrated donning of special garments, is strikingly unmodern and jars our contemporary sensibilities. The shadow of death hovers over much of the passage as the life of the scapegoat is contrasted with the threat of Aaron and the community of Israel's deaths should they trangress. There is an overarching concern with punctiliousness and propriety in today's reading. The text warns kol adam, every man, upon the pain of death, from entering the ohel moed before Aaron the High Priest has completed his part in the ritual.

I want to focus my comments today on the challenge of the priesthood's preoccupation with order. How can this seemingly straitjacketed piety speak to us?

First, let us begin with the text itself. The opening verse reads: va-yedaber ha-shem el moshe aharei mot shnei benei aharon bekarvatam lifnei hashem vayamutu. "And God spoke to Moses after the death of Aaron's two sons, who brought an offering before God and died."

Who are these two sons of Aaron who died bekarvatam, "when they brought an offering to God"?

We first meet all four of Aaron's sons, and learn their names in Shemot 6:23, where we are told of Aaron's marriage to Elisheva and of the birth of Nadav, Avihu, Elazar, and Ittamar. An important priestly family is born. They next appear in Shemot 24, where their tasks as priests of Israel are first articulated. "And God said to Moshe, Come up to God, you, and Aaron, Nadav, and Avihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel; and bow down from afar." As the mediators of worship in Biblical times, the members of the kahuna, the priesthood, approached God through sacrifice. Through the sacrifices, the korbanot that the priests and the community they represented offered, they drew close, karov, to God. Thus we find in Shemot 24:1 another detailed description of a sacrificial service, replete with altars, sacrificed oxen, and the sprinkling of blood, concluding with the powerful phrase that the blood of the altar is dam ha-berit, "the blood of the covenant." The careful efforts and orderly choregraphy of the service produces results; Shemot 24:9 tells us that "Moshe went up and Aaron, Nadav and Avihu, and seventy of the elders of Yisrael: and they saw the God of Israel." In Biblical times, the ability to see God, to communicate with the divine, was bound to the correct performance of the sacrifical cult.

Vayikra 8 underscores this point with an elaborate description of the kahuna, the Priesthood. There we are told of the anointing of Aaron and his sons, of the necessity of their wearing distinctive coats and robes. Different animals, and sometimes special grains, were required to expiate different kinds of transgressions. In each case, the blood of the sacrificed animal was integral to the ritual; Aaron and his sons place blood on the tip of their

right ears, on the thumbs of their right hands, on the big toes of their right feet. The priests are preoccupied with precision and order. Their life and death is conditional upon following God's commands; disobedience will make them as vulnerable as the sacrificial animals. And after the meticulous preparations of the sacrifices, God's glory appears, this time collectively to the whole community of Israel: "And Moshe and Aaron went into the Tent of Meeting, and came out, and blessed the people: and the glory of God appeared to all the people. And there came a fire out from before God and consumed upon the altar the burnt offering and the fat: which, when all the people saw it, they shouted, and fell on their faces" (Vayikra 9:23).

But something goes awry a verse later, in vayikra 10:1. Nadav and Avihu, Aaron's two eldest sons, spontaneously take matters into their own hands, and in a burst of enthusiasm grab the incense censers, ignite them and offer "strange fire before God, which He had not commanded." Their passion disrupts the pristine order that was necessary to reach God. Their enthusiasm is deadly. "And a fire went out from God, and devoured them, and they died before God" (10:2).

Nadav and Avihu's deaths are no ordinary deaths. Aaron is silenced, which in the Hebrew original, yidom, cannot but allude to the priesthood's careful and proper ritual use of blood. And he and his other sons are not permitted to mourn. But, Nadav and Avihu, and the cause of their deaths, are not forgotten. Vayikra 10:12 emphasizes their tragic deaths by referring to Ittamar and Elazar as banav ha-notarim, his [Aaron's] sons who remain." Bamidbar 26:60-61, too, recalls their deaths by "strange fire" when it discusses the division of land among Aaron's descendents, and Divrei ha-yamim I 24:2 states baldly that Elazar and Ittamar were honored with the priest's office only because of

their older brothers' deaths. And our parashah, aptly named aharei mot, "after death," begins with a recollection of their demise to remind us that precision, order, even fastidiousness are required of us during ritual service to God. The second and third verses stress the correct way for Aaron to enter the ohel moed and we hear echoes again of death in the words mot and yamut.

Our text emphasizes over and over again: The way we approach God is of life-and-death importance. Innovation is dangerous and not to be tolerated.

BUT...the tradition of the Priesthood is not our only tradition. Canonical as well are our great works of Classical Prophecy, such as the writings of Amos, Hoshea, and Micah, who enjoin us to reject the orderly Judaism of the priests for their passionate demand for social justice and hesed, love of God. They are rebels with a calling. The prophets ardently believe that God demands and wants more from Israel than merely the rote performance of ritual. Addressing his message to the collectivety of Israel in the 8th century before the Common Era, Amos articulates God's rejection of the sacrificial cult as a means of spiritual communion: "I hate, I despise your feasts and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings, I will not accept them, and the peace offerings of your fatted beasts I will not look upon" (Amos 5:21-24). Hoshea's famous remarks condemming Israel's idolatry exhort, "I desire hesed and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings" (Hoshea 6:6). Micah's snubbing of Israel's lavish offerings of "thousands of rams" and "ten thousands of rivers of oil" echoes the message of his prophetic comrades: morality has priority over priestly cultic worship.

Even the Torah itself advances a different model from that of the meticulous

prophesizing in Bamidbar 11:28, Moshe rebukes him with: "Are you envious of them on my account? Would that all of God's people were prophets and that God's spirit would rest upon them!"

We are presented with two opposing principles. On the one hand we are warned repeatedly to follow the Priestly letter of the law -- Nadav and Avihu are brutely cut down for their transgression of the pre-set order; and on the other hand, we are urged to follow our hearts, to seek the Prophetic spirit of the law -- Joshua is criticized for his conservatism regarding Eldad and Medad. So, which component, the Priestly or the Prophetic, should guide us?

Lest you think I am going to argue for a reinstatement of the kahuna, relax, I am not.

I think that for us, Jews who choose to daven in a Conservative synagogue in late 20th century America, there can be only one response. We must accept both traditions, the priestly and the prophetic. Their oppositional energy empowers our Tradition and propells us forward as a people. They collide and clash with one another, and we are kept alive by the contradiction of their demands. I really do believe, though it is no longer intellectually fashionable, that there is movement, a progress of collective consciousness, through dialectical opposition.

Yom Kippur offers us a good test for this dynamic contradiction. The matbeah, the "stamp" or "formula" of the day's five services was established a long time ago. In fact, the two central confessions, the al khet and the vidui, have historical roots as far back as the 2nd century before the Common Era in the scrolls of Qumran. These confessions are paradigms of order; they present

the spectrum of human transgressions in acrostics from aleph to taf. Wrongdoing carries the weight of the whole alphabet, from beginning to end. So teshuvah, too, must be complete and fixed. But, it is not enough merely to recite the alpha-bet from beginning to end. We have to mean it. Just as a poem without a reader committed to its active reading is merely a series of words in a particular form. The activity of the reader transforms the language of the poet into something moving, something meaningful outside the individual craftsman. Without sentience, there is no beauty. Yet we need to take our consciousness even further. Without action, without at least some small effort to change one's behavior, the beauty of understanding is held captive in the individual mind.

The Rabbis of antiquity ensured that we would inherit the mantle of Priestly Judaism by transforming the structure of the sacrificial cult after the destruction of the 2nd Temple in 70 C.E. into the complex system we know as Rabbinic Judaism. At times the demands of their system is overwhelming and seemingly irrational. It is difficult to find the spirituality in the neurotic worrying about whether one accidently put a cold milkhig spoon into a hot fleishig pot (or is it a hot milkhig spoon into a cold fleishig pot?), though if we had more time, I believe I could present a good argument for the rigors of kashrut. (A hint is this morning's text's preoccupation with the power of blood; the Israelites could not but recognize that blood was the source of life as they watched their priests sacrifice animals on the altar. We have sanitized the ritual, and in so doing, have distanced ourselves from much of its power. Given the grief that has shadowed our community in the recent past, we should understand that without blood's vital pulse, we are lost.)

But the Rabbis left an equally important, if not more demanding, task to us, the living community of Israel: the challenge of imbuing the fixed structure of Priestly Judaism with the spontaneity and creativity of Prophetic Judaism. This morning's reading clearly tells us that there is purpose in the precision of our ritual. Our difficult work is making that structure resound with the vitality of our own passions.

Devar Torah/Parashat Aharei Mot

April 29, 1995

כ"ט ניסן תשנ"ה

Before I get to the essence of what I want to talk about today, I just wanted to say that I selected this parashah in which to do a devar torah (as did Gary for the haftorah) in memory of my aunt, Roslyn Sinkoff, who died last year on the 29th of Nisan while we were in Israel. I don't really know what she would have thought about my speaking about her in shul, but I trust that she would not have minded. She was a devoted sister, aunt, and great-aunt, a dedicated elementary school teacher and a lover of big band jazz. She loved to show off at the piano and to regale us with the obscure names of her East New York first graders, always warning us, with great affection, to beware the little darling named "Angel." She died in the hospital, worn-out after a year-long struggle with pneumonia. I miss her; zikhrona le-berakha, May her memory be for a blessing.

Parashat Aharei Mot is comprised of three discrete chapters. Chapter 16 deals with the High Priest's atonement ritual on Yom Kippur; chapter 17 with giving the slaughtering of animals a sacrificial character and with the prohibition against eating blood -- which constitutes a fundamental principle of kashrut -- and chapter 18 with prohibited sexual relations. All three chapters begin with va-yidaber ha-shem el moshe, "and God spoke to, or, commanded Moses," to emphasize the heteronomous, commanded aspect of these laws. All three chapters are very clearly linked by a spirit of injunction that Israel's distinctiveness is cultivated through specific rituals and behaviors, as the introduction to chapter 18 states: כְּמַעֲשֵׂה אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם אֲשֶׁר יְשַׁבְתֶּם בָּהּ לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ וּכְמַעֲשֵׂה אֶרֶץ כְּנַעַן אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מֵבִיא אֶתְכֶם שָׁמָּה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ וּבְחֻקֹּתֵיהֶם לֹא תֵלֵכוּ. אֶת מִשְׁפָּטַי תַּעֲשׂוּ וְאֶת חֻקֹּתַי תִּשְׁמְרוּ לָלֶכֶת בָּהֶם אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם. "Do not follow after the actions of the land of Egypt in which you dwelled, and do not do the actions, nor follow the statutes of the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You should keep my

laws, you should walk in my statutes, I am the Lord your God." Within this introduction there is an explicit sense of geographic and developmental transition: the Israelites are between the land of slavery, Egypt, and a land of idolatry, Canaan, and must learn to keep themselves separated from the customs and statutes of both lands as they journey from one place to the other. In modern terms, this introduction in particular and the whole parashah in general can be seen as an injunction against assimilation.

Phrased in such a manner, it is hard to find something wrong with it. But, there is. The problem is the term "assimilation" itself. All of us here are assimilated. Though we all pay taxes, none of us fills out the requisite forms of April 15 so that the allotment which has been determined by the official Jewish communal organization recognized by the state can then be forwarded to the ruling authorities; we all have the right to vote; if we send our children to a Jewish school, it is by choice, not because the state's public schools are closed to us; English, which is the language of the state, is our mother-tongue and the language in which our correspondence, bills, deeds, wills, and other official documents are composed. In short, we are emancipated citizens of a modern state and to a great degree we are culturally assimilated to its mores.

This means that the stark, biblical bifurcation between faith and assimilation is not so clear for us. In the modern world, we Jews inhabit a kind of grey realm between faith and assimilation. This qualification of the term assimilation means that we have to be very careful when we use it, and probably should dispense with it altogether. Our parashah's certainty about the fate of the faithless who follow the paths of Egypt and Canaan (they will be "cut off" from the people) does not allow any room for the thoroughly assimilated Jew who, at some point in his or her life, takes the step towards faith. Our parashah does not allow for the modern journey from assimilation to acculturation, a journey which, no doubt, characterizes the lives of many of us here today.

I can think of no one whose life so eloquently embodies such a journey more than that of Franz Rosenzweig, the 20th century German-Jewish philosopher and Bible scholar. No one can serve better than Rosenzweig as an example of the dangers of writing off the "assimilated." In fact, it was the atonement ritual of Yom Kippur that begins our parashah that was the spur for Rosenzweig's return to Judaism. Born to a thoroughly Germanized Jewish family in 1886, Rosenzweig was a committed philosophic idealist until he was challenged by a Christian friend about the need for individual spirituality and an individual relationship to God. Unable to find any meaning in the Judaism he had been haphazardly bequeathed, Rosenzweig decided to convert to Christianity, a decision that ultimately became his reentry into Judaism. Rosenzweig had resolved to become a Christian as a Jew, like the first followers of Christ had, and at the age of 27, so the story goes, attended services on Yom Kippur for the first time. The experience on Yom Kippur was so profound that Rosenzweig rejected the waters of baptism and resolved to live a vital Jewish life, which he did, despite the onset and onslaught of a debilitating paralysis. Co-translator, with Martin Buber, of the Bible into a German keyed to the semitic root system, founder of the Lehrhaus for adult education in Frankfurt, author of The Star of Redemption, Rosenzweig created an extraordinary life which was animated first and foremost by his commitment to the reinvigoration of Jewish culture. In his efforts to revitalize Jewish life in modern Germany, Rosenzweig turned in two directions: to classical Jewish texts and to the classical Jewish language, Hebrew. Others here have already written beautifully about the importance of going "back to the sources." I wish to say a few words about Rosenzweig's commitment to Hebrew.

Rosenzweig viewed the revival of Hebrew, of an active knowledge of the language, as essential to the renewal of Judaism as a spiritual and religious culture. He was emphatic that the Jew as Jew could only gain access to the spiritual universe of Judaism through

Hebrew. Prayer had to be in Hebrew. Hebrew should not merely be a subject of study in our Jewish educational institutions, but the medium through which the entire content of Judaism was presented. For Rosenzweig, Hebrew was the vessel bearing the Jewish soul. At the end of his life, Rosenzweig's final wish was that his German works, particularly the Star of Redemption, be translated into Hebrew. This desire was only fulfilled in 1970, long after his death. But, in 1929, when Rosenzweig had already been paralyzed for more than seven years, and unable to move his limbs, to speak or even to smile and could communicate only through his eyes and with the one finger that had not degenerated, he was able to see the galleys of his German introduction to Hermann Cohen's writings, which had been translated into Hebrew. Some of his friends quibbled with certain words in the translation. Yet, upon seeing his text in Hebrew, Rosenzweig wrote: "It gives me such fiendish pleasure to see myself in the beloved twenty-two letters [of Hebrew], that nothing else seems to matter."[1]

I cannot be more eloquent than Rosenzweig, so I will merely echo his sentiments. I believe that our knowledge and love of Hebrew, which is related to, but independent of, our ties to the Land and State of Israel, is the sina qua non of a meaningful, modern Jewish life. We must embrace a post-modern, co-Zionist -- meaning in cooperation with Jews in Israel -- Diaspora Hebraism. As we continue our sojourn in America, we will become more and more assimilated and accepted into its society, and that is as it should be. But the risks of such integration are great. If the term "assimilation" as we normally use it means anything then it means a cultural karet, the biblical term for being eternally "cut off" from one's people. "Assimilation" is perilous because it connotes a total extirpation from one's religious, cultural and linguistic essence. There are are no quick fixes, no sureties, no easy black-and-white solutions to modern Jewish identity. But if we carry the compass of a

[1] July 14, 1929, to Julius Guttmann. Cited in Glatzer, Franz Rosenzweig, p. 166.

revitalized, passionate commitment to Hebrew with us, we will not get lost in the desert between Egypt and Canaan.[2]

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[2] See Paul Mendes-Flohr "Hebrew as a Holy Tongue: Franz Rosenzweig and the Renewal of Hebrew." Hebrew in Ashkenaz, pp. 222-241.

**Kedoshim: May 14, 2016**

Shabbat shalom—or gut shabbos, as the case may be.

One year ago, Bali and I had the joy of welcoming you to Ruby's bat mitzvah. So I thought I'd volunteer to give the drash today, as a way to commemorate a very happy occasion. Also, it didn't seem like a lot of work. When Ruby was preparing for her bat mitzvah, we assured hr that she was lucky, because Kedoshim would provide any number of beautiful and eternally relevant ethical precepts, which she could use to show how the people around her fall miserably below the standard.

The trouble is, when I started to study, I saw that the parshah is actually very difficult. I feel ashamed, in fact, for having badgered a 12-year-old kid into trying to make an intelligible public discourse out of this material, when I have no great confidence in being able to do it for you today.

Not that Kedoshim is the hardest parshah. I remember when one of Bali's cousins pulled Tazria-Metzorah. I attended that bat mitzvah some 20 years ago and recall how the child struggled. What made it worse—and this is relevant to today's parshah—was that the family attends a Reform congregation. So young Beth couldn't just find a nice, clean maze of Midrash through which she could wind her way harmlessly for a few minutes. She had to ignore the details of Tazria-Metzorah and invent a universal message of social uplift.

Which is what many of us would like to think we can get from Kedoshim. To which I say, in the words of a great American Jewish poet of the 20th century, "It ain't necessarily so."

Now, before I get started on the challenge that Kedoshim presents to our desire for universalism, let me say that I will not be talking about Chapter 20, verse 13, the pasuk that condemns to death a man who lies with another man as with a woman. A few years ago, Martin Sinkoff gave a very strong and moving drash about this pasuk, and why we ought to resist any impulse to try to erase it. More recently, Danny Nevins gave us a wonderful learning session about the way the Rabbinical Assembly has

interpreted this pasuk to produce halakha that I hope we would all find more humane that what we had in the past. I would be remiss if I didn't mention those two divrei Torah—but since I can't rise to Martin's and Danny's level, I'm going to pass on.

Let me jump to the main pasuk, the one that Rabbi Akiba called a pervasive principle of Torah: V'ahavta l'rayecha kemocha. And you shall love your neighbor as yourself. This is our very model of an inspiring commandment, located right in the center of the Torah.

Then I read Ramban, who spoiled it. He writes, Of *course* we're not commanded to love our neighbor as ourselves. The Torah doesn't expect us to go against human nature. You'll notice, it doesn't say "v'ahavta *et* rayecha," you shall love your neighbor, but rather "v'ahavta *l'*rayecha," you shall love *for* your neighbor. The things you'd want for yourself, you ought to want for your neighbor, too. This is no longer inspiring, but merely nice. All the pasuk really says is that we're not allowed to follow Gore Vidal's principle, "It's not enough that I win. Others must also lose."

So I went looking for a pasuk that was clearly about social justice. "Lo talin p'ulat sachir itcha ad boker": You shall not hold onto the wages of a laborer until the morning. This is more like it. But then I read Rashi, who spoiled it. He says, Of *course* this commandment does not compel you to pay the worker right away, when the day's work is done. The wages aren't due until one minute before sunrise. So keep him shivering there in the dark, if you feel like it. Again,t his is less than stirring.

So I went to the really grand statement, the one at the beginning: "Kedoshim ti-h'yu, ki kadosh ani Adonai eloheichem": You shall be holy, because I, Adonai your God, am holy.

Your mind expands at these words. Your spirit soars. Then Rashi and Ramban spoil it. What does it mean for us to be holy, Rashi asks. It means that we shouldn't indulge in any of those disgusting sexual practices listed at the end of Acharei Mot. You shall not mess around with your paternal aunt, because I, Adonai your God, do not mess around with Mine. I'm sorry, but this doesn't work for me. And neither

does Ramban's reading, which says, being holy is not just a matter of abstaining from sexual excesses. It's a broader concept. In *general*, you shouldn't have too good a time.

I doubt that any of us feel these interpretations get to the heart of what the pasuk means, or what we want it to mean. I think the thrill of this pasuk comes from our intuition that we *can,* somehow, be holy, as God is holy. We have that capacity. And the Torah implies that we do: "Vayomer Elohim, na'aseh adam b'tsalmanu kidmotenu:" And God said, let us make Adam in our image, after our likeness. So we might think that each of us has some trace of the divine, and we're called upon to realie it.

The modern commentaries, which we find in the footnotes to our chumashim, might not urge us toward this interpretation, but they imply it. And it's interesting how they do so. They frame this commandment as the exemplar of *imitatio dei,* the imitation of God. There's something to that, obviously. But the fact that these modern commentariesa consistently rely on the Latin phrase suggests to me why Rashi and Ramban don't come anywhere close to this interpretation. It's because an entire culture underlies the phrase *imitatio dei,* and that culture is not Jewish.

Let me put it to you this way. Over the centuries, diverse species have been sown in the intellectual and emotional fields where we hae lived. Catholic pietism. Protestant individualism. The universalism that came into full flower with the Enlightenment. And here we are, the hybrids. It's in our nature now—and as Ramban said, our nature is something we can't ignore.

So we leap at the notion that "Kedoshim ti-h'yu" has something to do with individual, personal virtue and aspiration. But this is not what parshat Kedoshim is about.

As the rabbis noted in Vayikra Rabbah, Kedoshim contains a string of p'sukim that clearly parallel the Ten Commandments. But whereas the Ten Commandments are given in the singular, as if to drive hom the idea that each of us was at Sinai, the commandments in Kedoshim are in the plural, because they're addressed to "kol adat b'nei Yisrole," the whole community of the children of Israel.

We are not being told here to be holy one by one. If you want to be holy as an individual, fine. You've got the laws of the nazir to cover that. But that's an option. What we are commanded to do in Kedoshim is to be a holy *people.* And the consequences of that commandment can be frightening.

What are two of the main ways in which a people can establish cohesion? It can do so by defining itself against an outside group, and by eradicating deviation from within. Kedoshim recommends both methods. In fact, it's full of admonitions against being like other communities, and instructions on keeping you neighbor in line by rebuking him, or cutting him off. And this is understandable, if we abandon the notion that Kedoshim is teaching universal ethics, rather than making a particularist demand. If we are to be a holy community, set apart from all others, then the pursuit of this goal will likely require a dose of intolerance and xenophobia.

I hope you know me well enough to understand, I don't say this to condemn our culture, let alon our Torah, as especially intolerant or xenophobic. That's one kind of particularism in which I cannot believe. I read the newspapers, the same as you, and I knjow there's enough xenophobia and intolerance to go around.

But that's just the point. I am a person of my time and place, the same as you, and I *do* want universalism and spiritual uplift. This is why I'm so glad that the Rabbinical Assembly has found a new way to interpret chapter 20, verse 13, why I'm so disappointed that chapter 19, verse 13 falls below the standards of the National Labor Relations Board, and why I long for chapter 19, verse 1, to tell me that I, personally, am only a little lower than the angels and can try to rise.

So Kedoshim is difficult. It both raises my expectations and dashes them. And I'll confess, I'd rather have my expectations dashed than allow myself the kind of particularism that uses Kedoshim to boast of the supposedly superior ethical standards of the Jewish people.

But if I can't do that, neither am I permitted to ignore the commandment: "Kedoshim ti-h'yu, ki kadosh ani Adonai eloheichem." I have no choice. I have to imagine what it would mean for us, all of us, to be a holy community.

So for the moment, let's set aside the xenophobia and intolerance that we share with everyone else, or let's pretend we can set them aside. Instead, let's ask what would be the positive characteristics that could bind us in holiness.

We know some of the obvious ones. We celebrate our smachot toegher, as at Ruby's bat mitzvah. We support one another when we're ill, or in mourning. This is tremendously important—but plenty of other communities do the same, in their own ways. Where do we find our *particular* communal holiness?

I'll tell you want works for me, because maybe it works for you, too. Consider this a late addition to the discussion about holiness that David Shapiro organized.

I feel I'm in a holy community during davvening when we reach the Shema. I don't hear *myself* recite the words. I close my eyes, and I hear voices all around me reciting them. And what makes it sound to me like a holy community is that the voices are not a unison, but a cacphony. They're out of sync with each other. They're at different volumes. They sing in four different keys, with a few on no identifiable pitch at all. And this messiness, this uncontrolled variation, applied to the single intention of proclaiming the Shema,k is what seems holy to me.

The sound is a kind of aural shatnaz—mixed, impure, emphatically human. But with my eyes closed, I can't identify any source, or tell who it's coming from—and so it's possible to imagine that I'm hearing the broken, provisional, earthly echo of a much better chorus above. On top of that, the sound is as universal as I might like—we are not alone in declaring the oneness of God—but particular, too, because nobody else does it like this. And although the text is grammatically singular, it's addressed to the entire people of Israel.

No sense of ethical superiority attaches to the commandment given in the Shema, if we observe it in this manner. But we do have to observe it if we want to be a community. And so, even though I have to relocate the Shema from another book of the Torah, I feel the commandment belongs here. It's one major way in which we can fulfill the injunction, "Kedoshim ti-h'yu."

Listen.

Shabbat shalom.

**KEDOSHIM** (Leviticus 19:1-20:27)
**Ron Meyers – Minyan Maat – April 28, 2018**

The only thing scarier than going into business for yourself – and relying solely on yourself for an income – is hiring an employee, and then having another person rely solely on you for their income. I found myself in this very gratifying and nerve-racking position several years ago, and as reluctant as I was to part with my money, I felt a very strong sense of duty to write the check without delay and to pay the associate at the earliest time he might have expected it. That was partly a matter of maintaining good relations with someone who I was, honestly, not paying that much. But it was mostly the voice of parashat Kedoshim in my mind, which I had heard forty or so times by then, and I had no idea how much it had sunk in. It truly took me by surprise: I did not know that the commandment to not keep the workers waiting until the next day for payment was so much a part of my programming.

A few years earlier had another experience of living out something I had previously earned only as an abstraction. When I and scores my colleagues had been laid off from a big law firm – I was reminded that we must give tzedaka even when we are receiving tzedaka. Even while I deposited unemployment checks for a while, I would find a dollar to hand someone on the street, and managed to write a few checks of my own during Elul, in the spirit of tshuva, tfila and tzedaka.

**We carry these ideas around with us, never knowing when or whether they will ever be relevant in our lives.**

It reminds me of the story of Rabbi Akiva in the Eleh Ezkera section of the Yom Kipur service – another text that we absorb repeatedly, year after year. In the midst of dying from Roman torture, he remarks that now, in this extra-ordinary moment, he can finally understand fully what it means to love Gd "*b'chol l'vav'cha u-v'chol nafshecha*[1]", which until then had been, at least in part, an abstraction.

[1] "with all your heart and all your soul"

May we all be spared that particular kind of extraordinary experience. But I must say, the extraordinary experiences of finding myself in a new situation and yet knowing what to do because of some well-formed nugget of knowledge held in reserve, have been some of the most fulfilling and enlightening experiences of my life. The equipment we need for life includes the knowledge for everyday actions, and also the knowledge we need for once-in-a-lifetime occurrences. Just as the equipment you need for driving a car includes both the ignition key that you use every time and the spare tire that you might never use. **Being prepared for life means being prepared for all of what life might bring.** That's what Kedoshim provides for us.

It gives us a catalogue of rules to live by, in both our ordinary and our extraordinary experiences. The extraordinary is perfectly at home in Leviticus, and especially in this section that is referred to as the Holiness Code. The very first comment for parashat Kedoshim in the Art Scroll chumash is that the word *kodesh*, holy, deeply implies that which is set apart. It notes that different words derived from that root describe both the pinnacle of splendor – the *kadosh k'doshim*[2] – and the separation of a disgraced and immoral person from the community. So central is the idea of separateness to the idea of holiness that Everett Fox, in his translator's notes, says that he regards Leviticus as the Book of Separations – separations between the holy and the profane, purity and pollution, the permitted and forbidden.

**But separateness is not a sufficient concept of holiness.** And that is reflected in the rules of living that we encounter in Kedoshim. These are not the rules of prayer or sacrifice, they are the rules of human interaction. And it's notable that the interactions that are contemplated may be ordinary or they may be extraordinary. We are told not to ridicule the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind – well, some of us have no occasion to encounter a person who is deaf or blind. And for us, those rules bear repetition exactly to train us for situations that are not part of our regular lives. Look how effective that training was for me when I suddenly had employees to pay. But now paying employees is a weekly regular routine

[2] The inner sanctum of the Temple.

for me. **The extraordinary becomes ordinary. There's no bright line between what's ordinary and what's extraordinary.**

Think of the relationship between ordinary and extraordinary if, for instance, you're a pilot on Southwest Airlines, and as you're sailing past Philadelphia one day as usual, your engine explodes, and you have to figure out how to bring yourself, and 149 people, safely back to earth. If you've read Kedoshim every year of your life – or the airline pilot's equivalent, the simulator training and all that – then perhaps you have such a skill. ...In fact, we expect an airline pilot to have that skill – we'd be very upset if they didn't. And yet, despite that expectation, we hail the pilot, Tammie Jo Shults, as a hero. She was widely praised for having nerves of steel. ...Because even if the emergency landing is a matter of professional competence, it is also an act of heroism. It's not enough to know that skill, you have great courage and composure to enact it. And, of course, even if it's your job to be a pilot – or a surgeon or a lifeguard – it's never a small thing to save a life.

Most of us are not pilots or surgeons. We may not be in the business of saving people's lives, but, in our more muted way, **we are all in the business of helping others to sustain their lives.** To sustain their dignity, their security, their good relationships and their good name. To survive, to grow and to thrive.

In these few pages at the middle of the middle book of the Torah, we learn what to do. But as with the pilot, it takes more than just knowledge to put it into practice. Behaving decently among our fellow humans day in and day out takes courage, composure, commitment. It may not take nerves of steel to leave a part of your field unharvested for the needy, but it takes a certain amount of gold in your heart – a certain amount of Gd in your heart – to treat another person, to treat every other person, as someone who has Gd in their heart as well.

And what else can it possibly mean to love your neighbor as yourself? It's hard enough to restrain yourself from coveting your neighbor's ox, or their tenure-track position, or their view of Riverside Park. What it means, I think, is **the conceptually simple, but operationally Very Difficult, task of recognizing each other person's humanity.**

I had a client a few years ago who was blind, and let me tell you: everything was a stumbling block for him – finding the right key to open the door, dialing the telephone, signing a check. Knowing him, I came to see that every line of this holiness code *beyn adam l'chavero*[3] is just the headline of a deeper story. We pay our workers promptly, not just to check the box on the list of right-things-to-do, but because that person has a student loan to pay, and because he might miss some other work if he has to come back tomorrow to pick up a check for the work he did today, and because the hierarchy between the boss and the worker is palpable enough already without making him wait until it's convenient for me. Loving your neighbor as yourself sounds lovely as a lofty principle, but it's at the nuts-and-bolts level of these daily acts that it actually happens.

There's a whole world of implications behind each of these rules, just as there's a whole world inside each person we encounter with the benefit of these rules. In the text of Kedoshim, the barrage of commands comes at us almost as forcefully as the crowd of people getting off the train. And Kedoshim reminds us that in **each of those people getting off the train, there is a core of humanity that is as vivid and urgent and palpable to her as mine is to me.** If I feel the spark of the divine inside of me, then I am bound to recognize that someone else feels it inside of her.

And so, the categories of the human and the godly weave together just as the categories of the ordinary and the extraordinary did a few minutes ago. They blend like the treble and the bass. And I feel that that weaving and blending are very much the point of our readings in this stretch of Vayikra. It presents many different interfaces where the holy and the ordinary meet in different ways.

The Temple rituals that are described in our recent parashayot are patently holy. They exist for the purpose of being separate and enacting holiness, and their separation from regular life is at least the signal, and perhaps the very essence, of sanctity. It's a sphere of holiness that

[3] Between man and man, as distinguished from obligations and relations between man and Gd.

is accessible only to the priests, and radically separate from us. It's the realm of pure ritual in which there is a sharp distinction between *kodesh* and *chol* – the sacred and the ordinary.

The laws of kashrut involve a different encounter between the sacred and the ordinary. Reading Shimini a few weeks ago, I thought, how strange that Gd demands that we be holy because He is holy, davka, in the midst of telling us that it's ok to eat grasshoppers but not ok to eat rabbits. A discussion of what we put into our mouths and stomachs does not seem like a suitable context for a discussion of holiness. But it is couched in the language of *tahor* and *tamei* – the conditions of ritual purity – that imposes a dimension of sanctity on the very most ordinary act of eating.

And then there's today's list of rules *bein adam l'chavero*. Here there is no talk of *tahor* and *tamei*. There is no ritual in the daily acts of life that are organized by these rules. These are rules, precisely, for the noisy tumble of the ordinary. And how are they laid out for us? With Gd insisting on His presence and His holiness at every turn. *Don't harvest your fields all the way to the edge; I am the Lord! Don't lie, don't steal; I am the Lord! Avoid corruption, do justice; I am the Lord!* In the course of all your acts of daily living – you deal with this person, you deal with that person, and there's Gd! And there, and there, and there.

On the one hand, this breathless insistence seems almost incoherent, like the sputtering repetition of someone who can't quite find the words to say what he means, or like a parent or teacher who can't quite get through to the kids. There's not a clear logical connection between each commandment and the repeated assertion "I am the Lord", just as there's not a perfect logical connection between the fact the Gd is holy and His assertion that we should therefore be holy as well.

But the repetition of "I am the Lord", at a minimum, underscores the idea that each of these rules of ordinary living comes from the same lofty authority as the rules of the Temple rituals. And, to me, it does more than that, beautifully expressing the idea that Gd is there among all the people we encounter through these rules, and within each one of them.

In this way our ordinary lives are all tossed together with holiness. Holiness is implicit in all our human interactions because holiness implicit in every human being we encounter. If the Temple is at one end of the spectrum of holiness, this is at the opposite end. This is a variety of holiness that is not separate, that is not distinct, that not defined by the extraordinary. It is not in the heavens or across the sea, it is very, very close to each of us. The kind of separation it requires of us is not a separation of space, or status, or purity, but a separation between the holiness of sustaining the good and moral character of human society, from the profane and hellish experience that results if we fail to.

Today, the holy day of Shabbat, will conclude with the blessings in which we thank Gd for distinguishing it from the other days of the week and distinguishing us from the other nations of the world, culminating in *baruch ata Adonay...ha-mavdil bein kodesh l'chol*[4]. But having reflected on the presence of the holy within the ordinary, I think I might try out something a little different on the other days of the week: *baruch ata Adonay....ki eyn havdala beyn kodesh l'chol*[5].

[4] Blessed is Gd for separating the holy from the ordinary.
[5] Blessed is Gd because there is no separation between the holy and the ordinary.

Rabid Parochialism Plus Uncompromising Universalism

Dvar Torah on Emor

Minyan Ma'at

May 8, 2004

When most of us think of the Torah, regardless of our particular beliefs, whether we conceive of the Torah as direct revelation, whether we think of it as a compilation from various sources, or whether we think of it as composed of metaphoric stories, I think that most of us think of the Torah as a narrative. We think of the narrative as beginning at the beginning and, just to think of the five books, ending on the eve of the entry into the "promised land." And then, of course, we start the story all over again. We love to hear the same story over and over again. Each time learning something new.

Most of our children learn the Torah that way—starting with Bereshit and then learning Sh'mot. Of course, interspersed with the stories of individuals, families, and nations, there are laws and other promulgations and exhortations.

Our children who start their torah learning with Bereshit are learning something very different about the world than the children in cheders. For how long I don't know, or whether it is still done today, though I imagine it is, but, again I don't know. Children in cheders, of course, start their torah study with the study of Vayikrah. Why?

Children know about dirtiness, defilement, uncleanliness, and even harlotry. What do their rebbes say to them about these apparent abominations? How do they respond? Are some sections skipped and only the sections on purity and sacred donations studied? Certainly we know that children have to learn to deal with all of their impulses and that during their pre-school and particularly during their elementary school years, the time of being in heder, they are socialized to keep those impulses in check and replace them with socially acceptable behaviors. What better way to keep those impulses in check than with the recurrent statement, "You shall faithfully keep my commandments." If you keep my commandments, that is, if you do clean things, you will be rewarded; if you break my commandments, that is, if you do dirty things, you will be punished. This repetitive kind of mantra is seen throughout vayikrah, but particularly in Chapters 17-26, The Holiness Code, in the midst of which we are with today's parsha.

This, of course, is a very different approach to child rearing than the one most of us are used to, in which we use narrative to help our children promote their social and emotional development. Children learn by placing themselves in others' shoes and identifying with other people via the various characters in the different biblical narratives. In those narratives, people do good things and bad things; there are good people and bad people; people do smart things and stupid things. Some people are tricky, some wise, and some are fools or let themselves be fooled. All of these people are prototypes of all of us.

In vayikrah, to the contrary, the addressees are the readers or the listeners if they are being read to. Regardless of the particular details of the particular rules, like the rules for priests in today's parsha, there is in essence only one theme.

Mary Douglas, in her book Purity and Danger, says it nicely, particularly about vayikrah (page 49):

"Any interpretations will fail which take the Do-nots of the Old Testament in piecemeal fashion. The only sound approach is to forget hygiene, aesthetics, morals, and instinctive revulsion, even to forget the Canaanites and the Zoroastrian Magi, and start with the texts. Since each of the injunctions is prefaced by the command to be holy, so they must be explained by that command. There must be contrariness between holiness and abomination which will make over-all sense of all the particular restrictions."

The highlight of holiness in The Holiness Code in vayikrah came last week, especially in Chapter 19 of kedoshim. This week, the stress is on the holiness of the priesthood, requiring them to be particularly pure.

Within this context of holiness and purity how do we understand the interpolation of the section which begins with the reference to the "fixed times of the Lord, which you shall proclaim as sacred occasions" (23:2)? The logic, it would seem to me, relates to the fact that the priestly source in the Torah is intimately related with the centrality of the worship at the Temple with all of the rituals enumerated here. The purity of the people

(particularly the person's body) and the purity of the Temple go hand in hand. And, of course, sacrifice outside the Temple came to be forbidden by those who took charge, that is, the priestly class. One nation, one Temple, unified in worship and unified as a polity. Again, as Mary Douglas says,

"The rituals enact the form of social relations and in giving these relations visible expression they enable people to know their own society. The rituals work upon the body politic through the symbolic medium of the physical body" (page 128).

So clearly the little boy (not girls of course) learns in heder the rituals and rules he needs to know to enter into his community of holiness. In a community of holiness, those outside the community are irrelevant, even profane or blasphemers.

Those of us who valorize narrative in the Torah and thus teach narrative and all of its implications to our children also valorize a universalism that is divergent from the values of a confined narrow community of holiness.

This difference— between universalism and the belief that the precepts of justice apply to all versus a parochialism that "we" are holy and the "other" is not—is, of course, quite relevant to our present age. We have all witnessed the unfortunate consequences of people who are indoctrinated into a parochial community of holiness, regardless of their actual religion. Or, as we hear so much during these days, they are those who consider us to be the infidel.

Can we simultaneously achieve both a sense of a singular community (holy or secular) as well as a universalism to counteract our tendency to parochialism?

Thinking of this existential dilemma it was so gratifying to read Chapter 24 verse 22 toward the end of the parsha:

"You shall have one standard for stranger and citizen alike: for I the Lord am your God." And, Rashi adds, "your God—the God of all of you. Just as I attach my name to you do I attach it to strangers."

Perhaps it is a particular combination of rabid parochialism and uncompromising universalism that has allowed Judaism to survive and Jews to easily flow from one society to another and from one particular form of ethics to another.

Shabat Shalom

Leon Hoffman

*B'har- b'hukotai 2004*

*Bethamie Horowitz*

Here we are at *B'har- b'hukotai,* the final parshah of the book of Vayikra.

It's hard to hear today's parshah: Not just because the *tohaha* is so graphic – But because the world according to Vayikra altogether is such an orderly place, while our world feels increasing disordered and chaotic and stepping beyond the pale of what should be.

In the torah cycle over the course of the year Vayikra can be read as how B'nei Yisrael, after leaving Egypt and receiving the Torah at Sinai in Shmot, is to become a *mamlechet kohanim v'goy kadosh* – a holy nation that will eventually make it into the Promised Land.

Vayikra is a kind of operating manual for a nation of priests: clearly defined actions and conditions that in their details convey how every aspect of life is a way of connecting to God. In this world God alone is the Master and commander, and the many details all point to God's ordered universe.

In Behar- Behukotai we have some specific examples of this orderly clearly defined world:
Jubilee and the *Tohaha*

Jubilee: The laws of land ownership
Every fiftieth year the land returns to it's original owner.

The land itself needs to rest—a break from the routines

Keep your fellows (brothers) out of servitude – the social justice of viewing other people in society as your brethren, rather than as more distant

The *tohaha i*tself – the "excoriation" that will result from Israel not following all of the laws and rules in Vayikra.

At its core it's about the Covenantal relationship between God and Israel:
If you, Israel do these things, I, God will take care of you – I will make the rain fall, I will make peace, the world will be orderly, and you will live in security and peace
If you don't do these things, I will respond in kind –

The upshot is that the parshah conveys **God's mastery, sign of order, sense of peace.**

**II. It's hard to avoid seeing the prescience of the parshah this week in relation to the very troubling world around us in our own time and the news events of the past week.**

Embodied for me in a number of words that appear in this week's Parshah:

BETACH--living in Security, the liberation and freedom encapsulated in the word DROR PERECH

לא תרדה בו בפרך ויראת מאלוהיך

25:43 You shall not rule over a person ruthlessly (not humiliate a person—i.e. work done only to emphasize the master's power over the slave)

KERI

(occurs 5 times in 26:21-40

It means acting in a hostile, contrary fashion, no sense of trust or cooperation or shared enterprise. It stands for the breakdown of the covenantal relationship that leads to god's mishkan (place of holiness) amidst the people

**III. Haftara**

We don't have the sense of the world as reliable. The haftarah offers us some alternative responses

Would that I were a person who could have faith in God. Those people will find their security in God. God will give them security.

ברוך הגבר... .

רפאני הי' וארפא
הושיעיני ואושיעה
כי תהילתי אתה

But our situation is reflected at the end of the haftarah.

**In these times, for those of us who can't call ourselves bothei b'adonai**
**We are left with a cry for healing, without surety. A cry of need and angst**

# BECHUKOTAI

Ron Lee Meyers – Aufruf – May 17, 2014

Today we have finished this year's reading of Leviticus, the book that gives us the rules of what's kosher to eat and what's not, plus a vast array of other esoteric laws. It's far beyond my learning to explicate the order of prescribed sacrifices (or much of anything else in Leviticus), but I can share my favorite Jewish joke on the subject:

Gd says to Moses, "Thou shalt not seethe a kid in its mother's milk." And Moses says, "Does that mean we need two sets of dishes?" And Gd says, "Thou shalt not seethe a kid in its mother's milk." And Moses says "Does that mean we have wait six hours between eating meat and eating dairy??" And Gd says "Thou shalt not seethe a kid in its mother's milk." And Moses says, "Does that mean we need two sinks, and two sponges, and two dishwashers???" And Gd says, "All right already, have it your way!"

On this special day of my life, the subject I wish to discuss is: waiting six hours between fleishiks and milchiks. Which is to say, I want to talk about all our RULES. We love rules. Judaism cannot get enough of rules. We have spent the past ten weeks reading in Leviticus of the elaborate, exotic, extravagant demands that were laid upon a particular nation of nomads who were years, if not generations, away from even being able to enact them all. From that time to now, rules are the organizing structure of Jewish life – not a specific creed of faith, not a particular philosophical tenet, but rules of conduct. It's the vast structure of rules

that created a social order for our ancestors when they were a wandering horde. The antidote to the formlessness of the desert and centuries of enslavement under another ruler's rules, is to accept the imperative of *this* set of rules. Which, of course, we have spent the past thousands of years elaborating in exquisite detail.

Some of the most familiar rules are those of forbearance and delay – the six hours between meat and dairy, the many prohibited actions on the Sabbath day, the many blessings to recite before taking various actions. There are rules of performance, such as all the sacrifices we've been reading about. And occasionally, there is a demand of haste, including one that I as an employer am often reminded of – the injunction to pay your workers promptly and not leave them waiting for compensation.

Encoded in all of these different kinds of rules is a profound belief in the elevating force of rules. The idea that we are ennobled by editing our impulses, by interrupting action with expressive speech and thought. And often, it goes further, to the notion that certain obligatory actions and speech, might elicit the thoughts that we ought to have, which don't always occur to us on our own.

In this way, rules are edifying – "edifying", both in the sense of "instructive" and in its etymological sense of "building". Our rules help us to build a moral edifice in which to conduct our lives.

And that is what I find most curious – that it should be necessary for us to build

such an edifice. It's one of the enduring mysteries of human existence that we must construct the moral sphere ourselves – that it is not part of our original equipment.

Natasha alluded to this powerfully last week in her comments about the blessing over performing bodily functions. (By the way, how pervasive is our culture of rules, that we should have a prescribed recitation over something so basic, and so base, as performing our bodily functions...) We thank Gd for creating our bodies with their myriad structures and cavities, such that if one were closed that should be open, or one were open that should be closed, we would be unable to exist. And, as Natasha pointed out, the phrase isn't just "to exist", it's "we would be unable to survive and to stand before You." These are two separate things – the surviving and the standing before Gd. We are created, and if all our structures and cavities are in good order, then we are fortunate enough to exist. But to stand before Gd is a separate function that can only then begin.

This gap between existence and standing before Gd is one of the things that Hamlet ponders: "What a piece of work is Man", he marvels. This blessing is one answer to that. It says that our bodies are dust, but, as Hamlet reflects, they add up to a "quintessence of dust" – a fifth essence that rises above the four elements of the earth into the realm between Man and Gd. "How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty... in movement how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god." Yes, but these qualities are only possibilities. They are not the result of our creation, they are the potential that is buried within creation.

When I started reading judicial decisions in law school, one of my favorite rhetorical flourishes was when a judge would overrule or dissent from another decision by stating that some proposition is not the end of the analysis, but only the beginning. So it is with our creation. We are created "infinite in faculty", but that is not the end of the story, it's only the beginning. It is for us to employ those faculties in crafting our lives among Gd and Man.

What act could express the awareness of our incompleteness more than circumcision on the eighth day of life? Nothing could state with greater force that we do not accept our original state as our final form. We are subject to, and must subject ourselves to, continual revision and improvement.

Which is Rather Exhausting. How many of us have the grit to examine and revise our personal imperfections every day? How many of us truly pray three times a day, or observe all the fast days, or say one blessing for eating fruits and a different blessing for eating vegetables, one blessing for seeing the moon, and another blessing for hearing thunder? And even if we do, how much do these enactments enable us to rise from our merely-created state to standing, fully realized before Gd? How much do they enable us to say of ourselves, how like an angel, how like a god?

Coming to stand before Gd is a lifetime's work. And we map it out for the poor child in the circumcision ceremony, by wishing that he continue on his path to the Torah, the Chuppa and to Maasim Tovim – to the study of the law, to the wedding canopy, and to the performance of good deeds. That's the schematic sketch of

the moral edifice that we wish for each new life to build.

But – does it seem to you, perhaps, like a bit of a funny trio? Torah and Maasim Tovim are clearly about rules and proper conduct. They are about learning one's obligations and giving of oneself to others. The wedding canopy is a celebration, a satisfaction. It's the receipt of attention from others. It's an indulgence of love and delight, of intimacy and sensuality... of registering for gifts! It's the opposite of Torah and Maasim Tovim – marriage is a feast for the selfish!

Right? ...No? Is that not what marriage is...?

No, the feast for the selfish – that's the wedding. And when the wedding is over, then begins the journey of realizing its potential. In our blessing, we say, my body has been created, and now I shall attempt to stand before You: Gd. In marriage we say, this bond has been created, and now I shall attempt to stand before you: my partner.

In India, when you greet someone, you say Namaste, which literally means "I bow to you", but culturally is understood to mean "I bow to the divine in you." It is up to us to see and to cultivate the divine in everyone we meet. That's a tall task. Marriage gives us a laboratory in which to attempt that task with just one person.

At some point in the first year that David and I were together, he showed me an old photo of him as a little string-bean of a cub scout, about 8 years old. And somehow, the first thing I felt in looking at that picture was, this little boy is who

I'm responsible for. I bow to the divine in you, and to the sweet little child in you. It's my job to look at you each day and to recognize in you: how like an angel, how like a god.

The edifying force of focusing on the depths of another person was described beautifully just yesterday, on the op-ed page of the New York Times, of all places. David Brooks made the claim that in understanding social issues and the world in general, statistics and data are a good start, journalism and narrative help us to dig deeper, but intimacy with another person is what brings us to the fullest understanding of the human condition. He cited St. Augustine's conclusion that "it takes selfless love to truly know another person. Love is a form of knowing and being known. Affection motivates you to want to see everything about another person. Empathy opens you up to absorb the good and the bad. Love impels you not just to observe, but to seek union – to think as another thinks and feel as another feels."

Also yesterday, I had a little email exchange that underscored the same point. Danny and I were discussing traditional wedding songs, and in referring to "Od Yishama", I erroneously typed "Od Neshama" – so instead of referring to the song that begins with "Again it shall be heard in the streets of Jerusalem", I inadvertently wrote "Another Soul". Which Danny graciously pointed out is itself a perfect description of marriage.

The union of souls in the Garden of Eden is described in the famous words of the King James translation: Adam could not find a help meet for him. People often

think that "helpmeet" is some antiquated-English version of "helpmate" but it's not. The word "meet" means "fitting" or suitable", Adam was in search of a helper who would be suitable to him. We all know how difficult that search can be. The word "meet" comes from the same root as the word "mete", as in to mete out justice or to mete out a scarce resource. It's all about taking care to make a judicious match.

There's no point in being naïve or starry-eyed about it – doing anything judiciously is difficult, doing marriage judiciously is so uncertain and so complex as to be a leap of faith. The Hebrew phrase that is translated as "help meet" is "ezer k'negdo". The root word, "Neged" has a slightly different connotation than "meet". Where "meet" means "fitting" or "suitable", "neged" means "in front of" or "beyond". It's word that denotes a pairing, with the implication of two things that correspond to each other, and also two things that are in opposition to each other. Any coupling is both a Correspondence and an Opposition.

To be in Correspondence and Opposition with another person is to hold up a mirror to oneself – to see one's own faults in alarmingly high resolution, and also to see the limits in what one person can do to influence another. Sometimes, when Correspondence tips over to Opposition, the quintessence of dust is lost, and we are left with only dust. It's a challenge that can batter us, or one that can better us, but hopefully it's one that somehow deepens and elevates us in either case.

Having skied the slalom between Correspondence and Opposition for seventeen

years, I can tell you that neither one of us is an angel or a god every day of the week. But I can also say [to David], how pleased I am to be spending all these days and weeks with you.

It's not consistent with any rabbinic law to hold a wedding after all these years of de-facto marriage. And it's consistent only with the very most recent rabbinic rulings to hold a same-sex marriage of any kind. (If memory serves, Leviticus has something to say about it...) But I can report that it's a great privilege that the rabbis did not contemplate, to come up for air in the middle of things, to celebrate all that's been and all that we hope will be. As I said in a drash a few months ago, praised be the middle.

Amid the myriad statements of obligation in our texts and our liturgy, we find this demand of haste in "Yedid Nefesh" the gorgeous poem we sing at the onset of the Sabbath, which imagines Gd and Israel as lovers and soul mates: "Hurry, my love, for the time has come to show me grace and favor forever." That's a demand that I think I can respond to. And it reminds us of the value of a life defined by demands – which is that some things are worth the wait, and some things are worth the rush.

# Drash for Parshat Behar – May 2019 –David Rosenn

Listen to Amos Oz tell a story about this childhood in Jerusalem: "We had an iron rule that one should never buy anything imported, anything foreign, if it was possible to buy a locally made equivalent. Still, when we went to Mr. Auster's grocery shop on the corner of Ovadya and Amos streets, we had to choose between kibbutz cheese, made by the Jewish cooperative Tnuva, and Arab cheese:

Did Arab cheese from the nearby village, Lifta, count as homemade or imported produce? Tricky. True, the Arab cheese was just a little cheaper. But, if you bought Arab cheese weren't you being a traitor to Zionism? Somewhere, in some kibbutz or moshav, in the Jezreel valley or the hills of Galilee, an overworked pioneer girl was sitting, with tears in her eyes perhaps, packing this Hebrew cheese for us – how could we turn our backs on her and buy alien cheese? Did we have the heart?

On the other hand, if we boycotted the produce of our Arab neighbors, we would be deepening and perpetuating the hatred between our two peoples. And we would be partly responsible for any blood that was shed, heaven forbid.

Surely the humble Arab fellah, a simple, honest tiller of the soil, whose soul was still undefiled by the miasma of town life, was nothing more or less than the dusky brother of the simple, noble-hearted muzhik in the stories of Tolstoy! Could we be so heartless as to turn our backs on his rustic cheese? Could we be so cruel as to punish him? What for? Because the deceitful British and the corrupt effendis had set him against us? No, this time we would definitely buy the cheese from the Arab village, which incidentally really did taste better than the Tnuva cheese, and cost a little less in the bargain.

But still, on the third hand, what if the Arab cheese wasn't clean? Who knew what the dairies were like there? What if it turned out, too late, that their cheese was full of germs? Germs were one of our worst nightmares. They were like anti-Semitism: you never actually managed to set your eyes on an anti-Semite or a germ, but you knew very well that they were lying in wait for you on every side, out of sight...

...A little argument used to break out among the customers in Mr. Auster's grocery shop: to buy or not to buy Arab cheese? On the one hand, "*aniyei irkha kodmim* - the poor of your city take precedence," so it was our

duty to buy Tnuva cheese only; on the other hand, "one law shall there be for you and for the stranger in your midst," so we should sometimes buy the cheese of our Arab neighbors, "for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." And, anyway imagine the contempt with which Tolstoy would regard anyone who would buy one kind of cheese and not another simply because of a difference of religion, nationality or race! What of universal values? Humanism? The brotherhood of man? And yet, how pathetic, how weak, how petty-minded to buy Arab cheese simply because it cost a couple of pennies less, instead of cheese made by the pioneers, who worked their backs off for our benefit! Shame! Shame and disgrace!

Either way, shame and disgrace! The whole of life was full of such shame and disgrace.

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I want to talk today not about shame and disgrace but about hope and solidarity. These lesser-known Jewish emotions are at the core of the story of economic decline that constitutes the bulk of *parshat Behar*.

Starting at the beginning of the fourth *aliya*, and continuing until two lines before the end of the *parsha*, we read about the following scenario:

First, a farmer falls into debt and is forced to sell part of his land. If he cannot redeem the land, a relative can serve as his redeemer, and the redeemer retains title to the land until the jubilee year. The farmer is left with a smaller plot on which to farm.

The farmer then takes out a loan to buy seed to plant crops on his remaining land and finds he cannot pay off the loan, so his creditor acquires his land, and the farmer works as a tenant famer on his former land in order to pay off his debts.

If the farmer still cannot pay off his debts, he enters the household of his creditor as an indentured servant and pays off his debt with the wages he earns.

Should the farmer be unfortunate enough to become the debt-slave of a non-Israelite, his relatives must redeem him.

As with many passages in the Torah, there is a sharp distinction drawn between Israelites and non-Israelites.

Israelites may not be sold as slaves, only as indentured servants, but in Chapter 25, verse 44, we read: "from the nations around you, you may acquire male and female slaves…They shall become your property, and you shall keep them as a possession for your children after you, for them to inherit as property for all time. These you may treat as slaves, but as for your Israelite kinsmen, no one shall rule ruthlessly over the other."

And a little further back, when negotiating loans with impoverished farmers, we are warned: "Do not exact advance or accrued interest, but fear your God. Let him live by your side as your kinsman…I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan, to be your God."

And this distinction between kin and others is even clearer in *parshat Re'eh*, where it says, "You shall not deduct interest from loans to your countrymen, whether in money or food or anything else that can be deducted as interest; but you may deduct interest from loans to foreigners."

Actually, that is already an interpretation, since the Hebrew says

לֹא-תַשִּׁיךְ לְאָחִיךָ, נֶשֶׁךְ כֶּסֶף נֶשֶׁךְ אֹכֶל: נֶשֶׁךְ, כָּל-דָּבָר אֲשֶׁר יִשָּׁךְ.
לַנָּכְרִי תַּשִּׁיךְ, וּלְאָחִיךָ לֹא תַשִּׁיךְ—

*L'nokhri tashikh* – you can read that as "you may charge interest to the foreigner", which is how the vast majority of Jewish interpreters read it, or you can read it more literally as saying "charge interest to the foreigner". That how the Rambam reads it, and he considers it a mitzvah for Jews to charge interest on loans to gentiles. It is positive commandment #198 in his list of the 613 mitzvot.

In any event, the sources very strongly assume that there is always going to be an us and a them, a kinsman and a foreigner, an אח and a גוי.

And this is not a bad assumption, for it seems to be true that we are most strongly tied to our biological or chosen families, most committed to those closest to us.

And so it would seem natural for us to have concentric circles of concern, exactly the kind imagined by the classic passage on charitable hierarchies from Bava Metziah:

Rav Yosef taught: If you lend money to any of my people that are poor with you (Exodus 22:25): A Jew and a non-Jew, the Jew has preference; the poor or the rich, the poor takes precedence; your relatives and the poor of your town, your relatives take precedence; the poor of your city and the poor of another city, the poor of your city take precedence.

And while this sort of tribalism has its very powerful strengths, it also has powerful limits.

What about those people who fall into the outer circles of our concern? Is there really any concern left once you focus it all in the middle?

Listen to Adam Smith in his less famous but much deeper book, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. He writes:

Let us suppose that the great empire of China, with all its myriads of inhabitants, was suddenly swallowed up by an earthquake, and let us consider how a man of humanity in Europe, who had no sort of connexion with that part of the world, would be affected upon receiving intelligence of this dreadful calamity. He would, I imagine, first of all, express very strongly his sorrow for the misfortune of that unhappy people, he would make

many melancholy reflections upon the precariousness of human life, and the vanity of all the labours of man, which could thus be annihilated in a moment. He would too, perhaps, if he was a man of speculation, enter into many reasonings concerning the effects which this disaster might produce upon the commerce of Europe, and the trade and business of the world in general. And when all this fine philosophy was over, when all these humane sentiments had been once fairly expressed, he would pursue his business or his pleasure, take his repose or his diversion, with the same ease and tranquility as if no such accident had happened. The most frivolous disaster which could befall himself would occasion a more real disturbance. If he was to lose his little finger to-morrow, he would not sleep to-night; but, provided he never saw them, he will snore with the most profound security over the ruin of a hundred millions of his brethren, and the destruction of that immense multitude seems plainly an object less interesting to him, than this paltry misfortune of his own."

Smith is harsh about the moral shallowness of this kind of response to those at the outer limits of our concern.

And so was Rabbi Yehiel Mikhel Epstein, the author of the Arukh HaShulhan, an early-twentieth century Jewish

law code he wrote while serving as a rabbi in one of the poorest areas of the Jewish Pale of Settlement.
In Yoreh Deah, section 254 of that code, you can see Rabbi Epstein struggling in real time with the idea of concentric circles of concern.

> The Tur wrote in the name of Rav Saadia Gaon: "One is obligated to prioritize one's own livelihood before any other person, and one is not obligated to give tzedakah until one has secured a livelihood, as it says [in parshat Behar] "*Ve-hai akhikha imakh*: And your brother shall live with you" – which teaches that sustaining yourself takes precedence over sustaining others, since if you die of hunger, your brother cannot live with you.
>
> And after you secure your own livelihood, then you should prioritize the livelihood of your parents over your children, and then prioritize your children". And our rabbi the Rama copied this and adds...If your parents are poor, they come before providing for your children; your children come before your siblings, and they come before the rest of your relatives; your relatives come before your neighbors, and your neighbors come before the [rest of the] people of your city; the people of your city come

before those of another city. And this is also the law if they are captives and you need to redeem them".

Now there is something fundamental about the details of the laws above that troubles me deeply. For if we explain the texts that I have cited according to their simple meaning – that certain groups are prior to others – they imply that [one may distribute the entirety of one's tzedakah money to one group within the established hierarchy] and need not give at all to those who fall outside of that particular group . . .And if this is the case, poor people without wealthy relatives will die of starvation. Now how is it possible to say this?! Therefore, in my humble opinion, the explanation of [tzedakah priorities] is as follows: Certainly every person, whether of modest or significant means, is obligated to give a portion of his [or her] tzedakah money to needy people who are not relatives. . . . And in places where there are no wealthy residents, should people be left to starve? How is it possible to say this? Nor do people act this way. [Arukh HaShulhan, Yoreh Deah 254:3-4]

So while the halakha may be clear, the conscience cannot abide such a rigid hierarchy – how is it possible even to say this? And anyway, people have a habit of extending

their circle of concern far beyond what family ties would call for.

Which brings us to cabdrivers in New York City.

In the past year and a half, eight professional drivers, including three taxi medallion owners, have died by suicide. Since 2016, 950 taxi drivers have filed for bankruptcy. If you have been following the New York Times reporting on this issue, you know that the economic disaster driving NYC cab drivers to ruin and despair is due in part to the emergence of paid ride disruptors like Lyft and Uber.

And you also know that it is also due to an almost complete lack of regulatory oversight as speculators bid up the prices of medallions and lenders made risky loans structured to keep drivers in a debt.

Who was looking out for these drivers, almost all of whom are low-income immigrants? Did anyone have them in their circle of concern? To whom did they seem like part of "us", whose welfare we make sure to look out for? To our great disgrace as a city, it seems that the answer is "no one".

Now how is it possible to say this?

Let's talk about the difference between a *rumya* and and a *tiyuvta*.

A tiyuvta is when one side in a Talmudic dispute cites a source to prove a point and then the other side cites a source from a higher authority.

Like when an Amora cites one of his teachers and his opponent cites a Mishna or a baraita. Those earlier sources always win. They are the equivalent of a knock down argument in the Talmud.

That is why tiyuvta can be translated into English as "refutation" or even "conclusive refutation".

A *rumya* is a different thing altogether. A *rumya* is when someone points out a contradiction between two sources of equal authority. A Mishnah that contradicts another Mishnah, say. Or two verses from the bible that seem to teach opposite lessons.

There is no conclusive refutation here. One source does not trump the other, and there are only two ways out of

a *rumya*. One is to throw up your hands and say "*teyku*", which is Aramaic for "let it stand".

Teyku is an acknowledgement that we don't have the resources to adjudicate a dispute at this level, so we just have to live with the tension.

Another possible way out of a *rumya* is to harmonize the two sources so the conflict disappears.

I want to suggest that claims and counterclaims over the phrase "the poor of your city come first", about the relevance of the idea of concentric circles of concern - are usually in the rumya category as opposed to something that can be solved by a tiyuvta.

On the one hand, we have a deeply held moral intuition that we have stronger obligations to those who are closest to us. Our families and our countries make claims on us that we generally accept as valid and binding. And these claims are not universal. I may have an obligation to do whatever I can to help feed the hungry, but I have a much stronger obligation to make sure my own children have adequate food.

On the other hand, I think most of us believe that our circle of concern is not exhausted by the people with whom we have close ties. Especially in a world where globalization and communication ties all of us in ever tighter and more complicated relationships, it feels wrong to look at suffering in distant places and say, "those people have no claim on me at all".

The opening of the book of Genesis makes it clear that we are all brothers and sisters , the children of one God.

"Am I my brother's keeper?" is not the right question. "How exactly am I my brother's keeper?" is far better.

Shabbat shalom.

B'HUKKOTAI – May 8, 2021

Inspiration comes in strange ways. When I read the Tokhachot to see if I could possibly talk about today's parashah on relatively short notice, I had the odd experience of remembering one of my favorite children's books - *Runaway Bunny* by Margaret Wise Brown, author of *Goodnight Moon* and many other classic children's books. Lest you think this is a case of pandemic brain, I've already diagnosed it as the tendency of the aging brain to forget recent experiences while dredging up memories like the name of a first grade teacher. As I thought more about this odd memory, I realized that *Runaway Bunny* has a rhythm similar to that of the tokhachot with each exchange having a similar meter. It can be read as the delightful tale of a frisky bunny who wants to elude his mother and a devoted mother who promises to track him down wherever he might run off to. But it might also be read as the story of a parent who is a bit paranoid, obsessive, cloying. Please indulge me in the few verses of this story I've read many times but about which I have a new perspective.

READ A FEW PAGES

**Leviticus 26:6**

Read against Leviticus, one might ask if that young rabbit will ever be able to live on his own. Will Mother always be just around the corner, ready to embrace him? While she doesn't threaten punishment, she refuses to allow him independence, and from the bunny's perspective this may feel like harassment. Read against *Runaway Bunny*, God seems insistently parental – caring, ever watchful like Mother Rabbit – but a far tougher parent. Four sets of promises introduce the tokhachot, written in perfect parallel structure: "I will grant you rains in their season…"; "I will grant peace in the land…"; "I will look with favor upon you…"; "I will establish My abode in your midst…", and each set includes verses of loving attention. At verse 44, following the tokhachot, God stands ready with the specific promise of a covenantal relationship: "Yet, even then, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them or spurn them so as to destroy them, annulling My covenant with them: for I the Lord am their God. I will remember in their favor the covenant with the ancients, whom I freed from the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations to be their God: I, the Lord." Even when the people are exiled in a foreign land, God promises not to destroy them.

But between those initial verses of blessing and the concluding promise that God will never reject or spurn the people living in the land of their enemies, there are 30 vituperative verses, linked together with escalating catastrophe.

**READ A FEW VERSES - Leviticus 26:14-45**
***The first set: verses 14-17**
***The second set: verses 18-20** link back to the first set: "And if, for all that, you do not obey me, I will go on to discipline you 7 fold.
***The third set: verses 21-22 links to the verses above** – "And if you remain hostile...."
***The fourth set: verses 23-26 –** "And if these things fail to discipline you..."
***And finally: verses 27ff –** "But if, despite this, you disobey me...."
These all lead up to the final threat of scattering the people – "I will spurn you..."

**26:42** - God, after all those tokhachot returns to a parental mode and remembers the covenant with the patriarchs; while there are no promises of redemption, at least God won't destroy them.

The parental analogy led me further down a literary path of divine threats and promises from Leviticus to Deuteronomy, looking for more of these extraordinary texts by ancient authors with unique ways of describing God's behavior.

**Dvarim, Chapter 27:15-26**, where curses are reported by six of the tribal leaders while the other six leaders stand ready to announce the blessings.
The literary style of these verses is different from the style of the Levitical tokhachot. Here they are delivered in parallel structure: beginning with "Cursed be he...", stating just the forbidden behavior and ending with the people saying "Amen", suggesting their submission.

**Dvarim, Chapter 28: 3-6** - Blessings for obedience

**Dvarim, Chapter 28:7-14 - More parallel structure:** "The Lord will put to rout...", "The Lord will ordain blessings...", "The Lord will establish you....", "The Lord will give you...", "The Lord will open for you..." "The Lord will make you..."

**Dvarim, Chapter 28: 16-19** – A short series of curses

Dvarim continues with **verses 20-68** that have a different literary style; the grouping of the verses is dense, including more description than the other examples we've seen, describing the ways in which God will bring down punishment, typically beginning with - "The Lord will let loose...", "The Lord will put you to rout...", "The Lord will strike you...", "The Lord will drive you...", "The Lord will bring a nation against you from afar...", "The Lord will inflict..."

Some of these verses constitute an entire story. Would someone read it?

**Verses 49-57 – "The Lord will bring a nation against you from afar, from the end of the earth, which will swoop down like the eagle …"**

The theological understanding of the one God is constant throughout these texts but the literary styles differ significantly. The singular deity of the Torah - all powerful and all knowing - is described throughout the five books in many different ways and God manifests many different behaviors. It is often said that God develops – even matures – over the course of the Bible. But perhaps the diverse voices of these ancient writers are responsible for God's variations. Whether or not these writers were fervent monotheists, they understood the deity and were able to imagine God in various ways, using language both of curses and blessing. Since museums opened last summer I've visited the Metropolitan, MoMA and the new Frick Madison often. During this deep dive through the ages, I've been marveling at the countless ways in which the artistic impulse has been expressed and found myself wondering, for example, if the artists of the Renaissance were necessarily all believers in the dominant religious truths of their time. But believers or not, the demand was for portrayals of religious figures and scenes.

Clearly there were superb writers in Ancient Israel with diverse styles of expression. Did an ancient editorial committee bring together various texts expressing the nature of the God of Israel? Or were gifted writers invited to contribute texts promoting the concept of a single, all-powerful God who both blessed and cursed the people. I'm not suggesting that Ancient Israel was filled with nonbelievers but perhaps there were some great literary artists who contributed to these extraordinary books. I wonder about these unknown authors who portrayed God in such stunning language. The bizarre inspiration of *Runaway Bunny* launched me on this literary approach and my frequent museum visits have broadened my thinking about how the environment influences the artist. There is some irony in the fact that the first curse in Chapter 27 of Dvarim is: "Cursed be anyone who makes a sculptured or molten image, abhorred by the Lord, a craftsman's handiwork, and set it up in secret." Alas, while there is precious little plastic art from Ancient Israel, we do have extraordinary literature!!

Judith Shulevitz

Behar

5/21/22

The main subject of our Parsha is the Jubilee or *yovel*. Since I've discovered that people generally know a lot about the sabbatical year and little about the Jubilee year, I'll try to describe it briefly. It comes every 50 years, seven sabbaticals plus one, and in addition to mandating some features of the sabbatical (such as leaving the land fallow), the Jubilee laws stipulate that all land sales that have taken place since the last Jubilee are to be nullified and the land to be returned to its original holders, and all Israelites who have fallen into debt slavery are to be freed.

I'm going to focus only on what happens to the land because this parsha happens to be the only one that deals with the laws of land tenure in the Torah, and I find them rather astonishing.

Chapter 25, verse 10, explains what happens with respect to land during the Jubilee:

ו וּקְרָאתֶם דְּרוֹר בָּאָרֶץ לְכָל־יֹשְׁבֶיהָ יוֹבֵל הִוא תִּהְיֶה לָכֶם וְשַׁבְתֶּם אִישׁ אֶל־אֲחֻזָּתוֹ וְאִישׁ אֶל־מִשְׁפַּחְתּוֹ תָּשֻׁבוּ׃

"You shall proclaim release throughout the land for all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: Each of you shall return to your holding and each of you shall return to your family."

This means, as we learn a few verses later, that if you have sold your land between Jubilees and it has not yet been bought back or redeemed, by you or a kinsman, then, come the Jubilee, it reverts to you, no cash required. Also, when the Torah says land, it means ancestral land, not just any old piece of real estate. We know this from, among other places, verse 41, where it's called אֲחֻזַּת אֲבֹתָיו

And just how ancestral is that land? Well, if you stick with the narrative timeline of the Torah, Moses pronounces these laws before the Israelites enter *ha-aretz*–so he has to be talking about the holdings that will be created when Joshua distributes the land among the tribes. Anyway, it makes sense, logically, that the land claims would go back that far. If the land reverts to the same clan every fifty years, then–in theory–the title should always go back to the same clans.

What is the point of all these laws? What kind of society are they trying to imagine? I would argue that the institution of the Jubilee incarnates some fairly radical principles of political economy.

What do I mean by political economy? Consider the word דְּרוֹר. It has historically been translated as "liberty," but JPS uses "release." This reflects a body of philological research that derives *deror* from an Akkadian cognate, *duraru*. The *duraru*, a practice known to have occurred in other kingdoms in the region, long before the writing of the Bible, was a general debt amnesty proclaimed by a king, part of which involved a return of confiscated land. In other words, the *deror* that comes during the Jubilee derives at least in part froma the *duraru*. Amazingly, we have a text from a Mesopotamian king who enacted a *duraru* who explains his reasons: it was necessary, he wrote that because officials stole property and land from citizens or else forced them to sell their houses. The proclamation in which a king announced the *duraru* was called a *misarum*, which Jacob Milgrom, in the Anchor Bible, translates as "a straightening-out." *Deror*, then, means overturning or "straightening out" the social order to undo the distortions of economic inequality.

To this idea of a social leveling, the Jubilee laws add that of returning the land to a particular *family*. Chapter 25, verse 23:

וְהָאָ֖רֶץ לֹ֣א תִמָּכֵ֑ר לִצְמִתֻ֔ת כִּי־לִ֥י הָאָ֖רֶץ כִּי־גֵרִ֥ים וְתוֹשָׁבִ֖ים אַתֶּ֥ם עִמָּדִֽי׃

"But the land must not be sold beyond reclaim, for the land is Mine; you are but strangers resident with Me."

On the face of it, this is quite odd. God gives the land back to your family every 50 years precisely because your family *doesn't* own it. *God* does. But the point is that God's ownership keeps you from letting the land pass out of your hands, at least for longer than 50 years. God's ownership deprives you of what since Roman times has been defined, at least in Western societies, as the key right of the property owner: *jus utendi et abutendi re sua*, the right to use and abuse your own property, including to dispose of it as you will. The Torah disagrees: use, yes, abuse or dispose, no. You don't even get to set your own price. A few verses later, God sets it for you: it's the sum of the profits from the harvests remaining before the next jubilee. In other words, you can't ask for market value, only the value of the use of the land, the usufruct.

Indeed, you are so far from ownership that no matter how long the land has been in the family, you're still just resident aliens on it, גֵּרִים וְתוֹשָׁבִים. That phrase, too, comes with a legal implication, since resident aliens in ancient Israel weren't allowed to own land. Once again, this is strange. Israelites aren't supposed to be resident aliens on their own land, which God appeared to have promised to them when he said to Avram,

אֲנִי יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאוּר כַּשְׂדִּים לָתֶת לְךָ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת לְרִשְׁתָּהּ

"I am יהוה who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to assign this land to you as a possession."

How to reconcile this apparently contradictory notion of ownership that is a form of non-ownership? The *mefarshim* explain. The land is held in trust; it is not possessed. God's proprietorship reminds the people of the proper relationship between God and them. Rabbeinu Bachya puts the general consensus well: "God is warning the Israelites not to consider themselves as the center of the earth." Moreover, "a servant should never aspire to be more than his master."

I'd like to bring in another commentator here. This one is emphatically not a rabbi. He's Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, considered the father of modern anarchism and France's leading socialist in his day, the mid-19th century. If you don't know Proudhon, you know his most famous phrase, Property is Theft. A little-known fact about Proudhon is that a year before he published the book that lays out this controversial thesis–it was called *What is Property* and it came out in 1840–he brought out another book that has lapsed into near-total obscurity. It's a long essay

on the Sabbath. To quote a man who was probably Proudhon's best reader, the literary critic Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve, Proudon's essay on the Sabbath contains all the germs of his later thought. It's where he first sketched out his theories about property and first defined it as theft, and he based all of this on the Sabbath, the sabbatical year, and the Jubilee.

Before I go any further, I should tell you that Proudhon wasn't just a socialist; he practiced the socialism of fools. He was an anti-Semite, and a really egregious one. He called Jews spies, usurers, parasites, class enemies, and worse. His anti-Semitism and his agrarian socialism are not unrelated, but I'm going to ask you to set that aside and take a look at what he did with the Jubilee.

Proudhon's main point is that the Jubilee forestalls the concentration of land into great, privately owned estates–what the Romans called *latifundia*– as well as the enslavement of those who are displaced in the process. Moses, says Proudhon, laid down the law of the Jubilee because he was devoted to universal equality and considered it incompatible with *cumul*, the French term for what Marx called primitive accumulation. I should add another note: Marx, a prolific plagiarist, stole many ideas from Proudhon. This is easy to demonstrate textually and can also be deduced from the fact that Marx trashes Proudhon as a naive utopian.

The nastier Marx was about a fellow thinker, the more you know he stole from him. (Proudhon defended himself by pointing out that Marx was a Jew.) But it is through Marx that Proudhon's ideas entered the mainstream of modern political thought, and I find it pretty remarkable that those ideas are to a not insignificant degree based on the Jubilee.

To go back to Proudhon: he says that all men are born with the right to live, which at the prehistoric time he was imagining, meant the right to live off the land. But they are not born with the right to own it. They may live off the land and profit from its fruits. But land is a gift from God, and man but a passenger upon it. This seems to me a clear allusion to our verse above. It is when humans seize the land for themselves, Proudon says, and turn use into possession, and a man has the right to dispose of his land as he wishes that, paradoxically, he becomes subject to pressure to give it up to settle debts. Worse, without something like a Jubilee, as our Mesopotamian king told us, stolen land never has to be given back. (Proudhon, of course, didn't quote that king.) Once land can be hoarded, says Proudhon, society divides into those who live in opulence and those who live in squalor. The Jubilee comes to teach us that it is a crime to monopolize natural resources. He actually uses the French word for "monopolize." This is roughly what Proudhon means when he says property equals theft.

Another rough parallel with the Jubilee is that Proudhon considered the ideal social organization to be community-based, not governed from above–this is why he's called an anarchist. Actually, his ideas were pretty similar to those of a lot of other 19th-century communitarian socialists. But what makes Proudon unique, in my opinion, is that he roots this idea in the notion that land should revert to small groups–in Biblical terms, clans– who are to hold it in common.

I think it may be a bit of a stretch to find an exact equivalent of the socialist notion of the commons at the heart of the Biblical laws of the Jubilee, but that's beside the point. My point is that Proudhon took from the Jubilee a vision of redistributive justice that has become quite relevant in our age of extreme inequality. The Jubilee's periodic restoration of the status quo ante, its busting up of, let's call them monopolies, amounted to a return of sovereignty, or, as Proudhon put it, "executive power," to the people.

In deriving an idea of popular sovereignty from the Jubilee, Proudhon again echoes the *mefarshim*–not that he would have known that–who described that sovereignty more poetically. This helps us understand why it was important to them to translate *deror* as "liberty." Rashi compares it to freedom of residence: "R. Jehuda said, "What is the

etymology of the term דרור, freedom? A free man is like a person who may dwell (דור) at an inn — meaning that he may reside in any place he pleases, and is not under the control of others." (Rosh Hashanah 9b). Ibn Ezra interprets the word *deror* in light of a verse in Mishlei (26:2):

"כַּצִּפּוֹר לָנוּד כַּדְּרוֹר לָעוּף"

"a sparrow must flit and a swallow fly,"

*The flying swallow* or *deror*, says Ibn Ezra, refers to a small bird that produces music when it is free. However, if it is taken captive it refuses to eat and starves to death.

Milgrom brings the radical political potential of the Jubilee to bear on the present. In 1996, he attended an international symposium on the Jubilee, where he met third-world participants who cited its laws as a rallying cry for their efforts to free themselves from the onerous terms imposed on them by the IMF and the creditor nations it represents. These participants demanded Jubilee-like forms of release–the cancellation of debts, restitution of land and resources to original owners, the end of economic slavery. As Milgrom concludes, "The Jubilee laws … offer a realistic blueprint for bridging the economic gap

between the have and have-not nations, which otherwise portends political uprisings that can engulf the entire world."

Parashah Behukotai

The tokhekha or rebuke, or admonition, offers an apocalyptic vision of a devastated people and a barren land. The abundance of the land and the orderly sequence of the seasons have ended. These conditions are the consequence of neglecting the ordering of time (with Sabbaths for humans and the lands), of constructing false images which block our ability to see the divine source manifest in creation itself.

Though there is the potential for return, signaled in the final verses, it is the destruction that is most evident.

And this is a destruction we are already witnessing: the heavens like iron, the earth like brass describe the areas devastated by long droughts. Poor harvests, people fleeing in terror, violence unleased: these sequences are taking place in vulnerable regions right now.

A call, indeed, to abandon our prideful sense of being the sole masters of the universe, to leave behind the worship of the objects we fashion. A call to return to balance with the world of which we are just one part.

יד וְאִם-לֹא תִשְׁמְעוּ, לִי; וְלֹא
תַעֲשׂוּ, אֵת כָּל-הַמִּצְוֹת הָאֵלֶּה.

**14** But if ye will not hearken unto Me, and will not do all these commandments;

טו וְאִם-בְּחֻקֹּתַי תִּמְאָסוּ, וְאִם אֶת-מִשְׁפָּטַי תִּגְעַל נַפְשְׁכֶם, לְבִלְתִּי עֲשׂוֹת אֶת-כָּל-מִצְוֹתָי, לְהַפְרְכֶם אֶת-בְּרִיתִי.

15 and if ye shall reject My statutes, and if your soul abhor Mine ordinances, so that ye will not do all My commandments, but break My covenant;

טז אַף-אֲנִי אֶעֱשֶׂה-זֹּאת לָכֶם, וְהִפְקַדְתִּי עֲלֵיכֶם בֶּהָלָה אֶת-הַשַּׁחֶפֶת וְאֶת-הַקַּדַּחַת, מְכַלּוֹת עֵינַיִם, וּמְדִיבַת נָפֶשׁ; וּזְרַעְתֶּם לָרִיק זַרְעֲכֶם, וַאֲכָלֻהוּ אֹיְבֵיכֶם.

16 I also will do this unto you: I will appoint terror over you, even consumption and fever, that shall make the eyes to fail, and the soul to languish; and ye shall sow your seed in vain, for your enemies shall eat it.

יז וְנָתַתִּי פָנַי בָּכֶם, וְנִגַּפְתֶּם לִפְנֵי אֹיְבֵיכֶם; וְרָדוּ בָכֶם שֹׂנְאֵיכֶם, וְנַסְתֶּם וְאֵין-רֹדֵף אֶתְכֶם.

17 And I will set My face against you, and ye shall be smitten before your enemies; they that hate you shall rule over you; and ye shall flee when none pursueth you.

יח וְאִם-עַד-אֵלֶּה--לֹא תִשְׁמְעוּ, לִי: וְיָסַפְתִּי לְיַסְּרָה אֶתְכֶם, שֶׁבַע עַל-חַטֹּאתֵיכֶם.

18 And if ye will not yet for these things hearken unto Me, then I will chastise you seven times more for your sins.

יט וְשָׁבַרְתִּי, אֶת-גְּאוֹן עֻזְּכֶם; וְנָתַתִּי אֶת-שְׁמֵיכֶם כַּבַּרְזֶל, וְאֶת-אַרְצְכֶם כַּנְּחֹשָׁה.

19 And I will break the pride of your power; and I will make your heaven as iron, and your earth as brass.

כ וְתַם לָרִיק, כֹּחֲכֶם; וְלֹא-תִתֵּן אַרְצְכֶם, אֶת-יְבוּלָהּ, וְעֵץ הָאָרֶץ, לֹא יִתֵּן פִּרְיוֹ.

20 And your strength shall be spent in vain; for your land shall not yield her produce, neither shall the trees of the land yield their fruit.

כא וְאִם-תֵּלְכוּ עִמִּי קֶרִי, וְלֹא תֹאבוּ לִשְׁמֹעַ לִי--וְיָסַפְתִּי עֲלֵיכֶם מַכָּה, שֶׁבַע כְּחַטֹּאתֵיכֶם.

21 And if ye walk contrary unto Me, and will not hearken unto Me; I will bring seven times more plagues upon you according to your sins.

כב וְהִשְׁלַחְתִּי בָכֶם אֶת-חַיַּת הַשָּׂדֶה, וְשִׁכְּלָה אֶתְכֶם, וְהִכְרִיתָה אֶת-בְּהֶמְתְּכֶם, וְהִמְעִיטָה אֶתְכֶם; וְנָשַׁמּוּ, דַּרְכֵיכֶם.

22 And I will send the beast of the field among you, which shall rob you of your children, and destroy your cattle, and make you few in number; and your ways shall become desolate.

כג וְאִם-בְּאֵלֶּה--לֹא תִוָּסְרוּ, לִי; וַהֲלַכְתֶּם עִמִּי, קֶרִי.

23 And if in spite of these things ye will not be corrected unto Me, but will walk contrary unto Me;

כד וְהָלַכְתִּי אַף-אֲנִי עִמָּכֶם, בְּקֶרִי; וְהִכִּיתִי אֶתְכֶם גַּם-אָנִי, שֶׁבַע עַל-חַטֹּאתֵיכֶם.

24 then will I also walk contrary unto you; and I will smite you, even I, seven times for your sins.

כה וְהֵבֵאתִי עֲלֵיכֶם חֶרֶב, נֹקֶמֶת נְקַם-בְּרִית, וְנֶאֱסַפְתֶּם, אֶל-עָרֵיכֶם; וְשִׁלַּחְתִּי דֶבֶר בְּתוֹכְכֶם, וְנִתַּתֶּם בְּיַד-אוֹיֵב.

25 And I will bring a sword upon you, that shall execute the vengeance of the covenant; and ye shall be gathered together within your cities; and I will send the pestilence among you; and ye shall be delivered into the hand of the enemy.

כו בְּשִׁבְרִי לָכֶם, מַטֵּה-לֶחֶם, וְאָפוּ עֶשֶׂר נָשִׁים לַחְמְכֶם בְּתַנּוּר אֶחָד, וְהֵשִׁיבוּ לַחְמְכֶם בַּמִּשְׁקָל; וַאֲכַלְתֶּם, וְלֹא תִשְׂבָּעוּ. {ס}

26 When I break your staff of bread, ten women shall bake your bread in one oven, and they shall deliver your bread again by weight; and ye shall eat, and not be satisfied. {S}

כז וְאִם-בְּזֹאת--לֹא תִשְׁמְעוּ, לִי; וַהֲלַכְתֶּם עִמִּי, בְּקֶרִי.

27 And if ye will not for all this hearken unto Me, but walk contrary unto Me;

כח וְהָלַכְתִּי עִמָּכֶם, בַּחֲמַת-קֶרִי; וְיִסַּרְתִּי אֶתְכֶם אַף-אֲנִי, שֶׁבַע עַל-חַטֹּאתֵיכֶם.

28 then I will walk contrary unto you in fury; and I also will chastise you seven times for your sins.

כט וַאֲכַלְתֶּם, בְּשַׂר בְּנֵיכֶם; וּבְשַׂר בְּנֹתֵיכֶם, תֹּאכֵלוּ.

29 And ye shall eat the flesh of your sons, and the flesh of your daughters shall ye eat.

ל וְהִשְׁמַדְתִּי אֶת-בָּמֹתֵיכֶם, וְהִכְרַתִּי אֶת-חַמָּנֵיכֶם, וְנָתַתִּי אֶת-פִּגְרֵיכֶם, עַל-פִּגְרֵי גִלּוּלֵיכֶם; וְגָעֲלָה נַפְשִׁי, אֶתְכֶם.

30 And I will destroy your high places, and cut down your sun-pillars, and cast your carcasses upon the carcasses of your idols; and My soul shall abhor you.

לא וְנָתַתִּי אֶת-עָרֵיכֶם חָרְבָּה, וַהֲשִׁמוֹתִי אֶת-מִקְדְּשֵׁיכֶם; וְלֹא אָרִיחַ, בְּרֵיחַ נִיחֹחֲכֶם.

31 And I will make your cities a waste, and will bring your sanctuaries unto desolation, and I will not smell the savour of your sweet odours.

לב וְהַשְׁמֹתִי אֲנִי, אֶת-הָאָרֶץ; וְשָׁמְמוּ עָלֶיהָ אֹיְבֵיכֶם, הַיֹּשְׁבִים בָּהּ.

32 And I will bring the land into desolation; and your enemies that dwell therein shall be astonished at it.

לג וְאֶתְכֶם אֱזָרֶה בַגּוֹיִם, וַהֲרִיקֹתִי אַחֲרֵיכֶם חָרֶב; וְהָיְתָה אַרְצְכֶם שְׁמָמָה, וְעָרֵיכֶם יִהְיוּ חָרְבָּה.

33 And you will I scatter among the nations, and I will draw out the sword after you; and your land shall be a desolation, and your cities shall be a waste.

לד אָז תִּרְצֶה הָאָרֶץ אֶת-שַׁבְּתֹתֶיהָ, כֹּל יְמֵי הָשַּׁמָּה, וְאַתֶּם, בְּאֶרֶץ אֹיְבֵיכֶם; אָז תִּשְׁבַּת הָאָרֶץ, וְהִרְצָת אֶת-שַׁבְּתֹתֶיהָ.

34 Then shall the land be paid her sabbaths, as long as it lieth desolate, and ye are in your enemies' land; even then shall the land rest, and repay her sabbaths.

לה כָּל-יְמֵי הָשַּׁמָּה, תִּשְׁבֹּת, אֵת אֲשֶׁר לֹא-שָׁבְתָה בְּשַׁבְּתֹתֵיכֶם, בְּשִׁבְתְּכֶם עָלֶיהָ.

35 As long as it lieth desolate it shall have rest; even the rest which it had not in your sabbaths, when ye dwelt upon it.

לו וְהַנִּשְׁאָרִים בָּכֶם--וְהֵבֵאתִי מֹרֶךְ בִּלְבָבָם, בְּאַרְצֹת אֹיְבֵיהֶם; וְרַדַף אֹתָם, קוֹל עָלֶה נִדָּף, וְנָסוּ מְנֻסַת-חֶרֶב וְנָפְלוּ, וְאֵין רֹדֵף.

36 And as for them that are left of you, I will send a faintness into their heart in the lands of their enemies; and the sound of a driven leaf shall chase them; and they shall flee, as one fleeth from the sword; and they shall fall when none pursueth.

לז וְכָשְׁלוּ אִישׁ-בְּאָחִיו כְּמִפְּנֵי-חָרֶב, וְרֹדֵף אָיִן; וְלֹא-תִהְיֶה לָכֶם תְּקוּמָה, לִפְנֵי אֹיְבֵיכֶם.

37 And they shall stumble one upon another, as it were before the sword, when none pursueth; and ye shall have no power to stand before your enemies.

לח וַאֲבַדְתֶּם, בַּגּוֹיִם; וְאָכְלָה אֶתְכֶם, אֶרֶץ אֹיְבֵיכֶם.

38 And ye shall perish among the nations, and the land of your enemies shall eat you up.

לט וְהַנִּשְׁאָרִים בָּכֶם, יִמַּקּוּ בַּעֲוֹנָם, בְּאַרְצֹת, אֹיְבֵיכֶם; וְאַף בַּעֲוֹנֹת אֲבֹתָם, אִתָּם יִמָּקּוּ.

39 And they that are left of you shall pine away in their iniquity in your enemies' lands; and also in the iniquities of their fathers shall they pine away with them.

מ וְהִתְוַדּוּ אֶת-עֲוֹנָם וְאֶת-עֲוֹן אֲבֹתָם, בְּמַעְלָם אֲשֶׁר מָעֲלוּ-בִי, וְאַף, אֲשֶׁר-הָלְכוּ עִמִּי בְּקֶרִי.

40 And they shall confess their iniquity, and the iniquity of their fathers, in their treachery which they committed against Me, and also that they have walked contrary unto Me.

מא אַף-אֲנִי, אֵלֵךְ עִמָּם בְּקֶרִי, וְהֵבֵאתִי אֹתָם, בְּאֶרֶץ אֹיְבֵיהֶם; אוֹ-אָז יִכָּנַע, לְבָבָם הֶעָרֵל, וְאָז, יִרְצוּ אֶת-עֲוֹנָם.

41 I also will walk contrary unto them, and bring them into the land of their enemies; if then perchance their uncircumcised heart be humbled, and they then be paid the punishment of their iniquity;

מב וְזָכַרְתִּי, אֶת-בְּרִיתִי יַעֲקוֹב; וְאַף אֶת-בְּרִיתִי יִצְחָק וְאַף אֶת-בְּרִיתִי אַבְרָהָם, אֶזְכֹּר--וְהָאָרֶץ אֶזְכֹּר.

42 then will I remember My covenant with Jacob, and also My covenant with Isaac, and also My covenant with Abraham will I remember; and I will remember the land.

מג וְהָאָרֶץ תֵּעָזֵב מֵהֶם וְתֵרֶץ אֶת-שַׁבְּתֹתֶיהָ, בָּהְשַׁמָּה מֵהֶם, וְהֵם, יִרְצוּ אֶת-עֲוֹנָם; יַעַן וּבְיַעַן--בְּמִשְׁפָּטַי מָאָסוּ, וְאֶת-חֻקֹּתַי גָּעְלָה נַפְשָׁם.

43 For the land shall lie forsaken without them, and shall be paid her sabbaths, while she lieth desolate without them; and they shall be paid the punishment of their iniquity; because, even because they rejected Mine ordinances, and their soul abhorred My statutes.

מד וְאַף-גַּם-זֹאת בִּהְיוֹתָם בְּאֶרֶץ
אֹיְבֵיהֶם, לֹא-מְאַסְתִּים וְלֹא-גְעַלְתִּים
לְכַלֹּתָם--לְהָפֵר בְּרִיתִי, אִתָּם: כִּי
אֲנִי יְהוָה, אֱלֹהֵיהֶם.

**44** And yet for all that, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them, neither will I abhor them, to destroy them utterly, and to break My covenant with them; for I am the LORD their God.

מה וְזָכַרְתִּי לָהֶם, בְּרִית
רִאשֹׁנִים: אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִי-אֹתָם
מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לְעֵינֵי הַגּוֹיִם, לִהְיוֹת
לָהֶם לֵאלֹהִים--אֲנִי יְהוָה.

**45** But I will for their sakes remember the covenant of their ancestors, whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations, that I might be their God: I am the LORD.

Dvar Torah in honor of Steven and Miriam
Erev Rosh Hodesh Sivan
June 3, 2000

The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron saying: The Israelites shall camp each with his standard, under the banners of their ancestral house; they shall camp around the Tent of Meeting at a distance (Bamidbar 2:1-2).

Can you imagine that setting in the desert? The tribe of Judah with Moses, Aaron and his sons to the East, the Division of Ephraim to the West, of Reuben to the South, and the Division of Dan to the North? Can one imagine that conglomerate of desert nomads at a moment of respite at the beginning of the second month of the second year after their release from bondage, and one month after the erection of the tabernacle. The rebellion of Korah was yet to come but perhaps the episode of the Golden Calf was but a distant memory.

How did these multitudes come together for this one moment in time and allow themselves to be counted? Can we imagine backward from our vantage point at the very beginning of the third millenium of the Common Era to the end of the second millenium before the common era? How similar and how different were these Israelites, from each other? From us?

Of course, one can only imagine from one's own perspective. Try as we may, we are limited in our empathic understanding of the other person, particularly an other person whom we have never seen, touched, smelled, heard, or tasted. Can we truly be

empathic with our co-religionists with whom we do not dine, with whom we do not break bread? With whom we do not share a shabat or a holiday?

During the last three weeks, our family has had a distinctly unique honor of breaking bread in several diverse communities. Two weeks ago we were at Gordon Tucker's shul in Scarsdale, celebrating the bat mitzvah of our niece Danielle. Last shabat we went to the lower East Side, for Steven's downtown auf ruf at Rabbi Singer's shul on Stanton Street south of Houston and Sunday night we went to the most completely secular wedding we have ever attended, officiated by a Judge. And today, we are back on the Upper West Side. Perhaps it is not too much of a stretch of the imagination to say that, like the conglomerate of desert nomads over three thousand years ago, each of these 4 groupings occupies its own distinctive special space around a mythical Tent of Meeting. Each group choosing its own position from its own perspective. Like in all walks of life each of us and each of our groups to which we belong has to be responsible for its own choices and its own actions.

A central action in a person's life is, of course, the action to join with an other, to make that other person an intimate part of one's life. That other person is one whose sight, touch, smell, sound, and taste will become as familiar to you as your own senses are second nature to you. That other person, the one who will become LIKE you while still remaining very much UNLIKE you, will be a person with whom you can continue your future travels in life.

Miriam and Steven, tomorrow you will stand under the chuppah (the Kleiner family chuppah on which your special insignia will then find its place in one of the corners). The chuppah will be raised at a place once known as the Norfolk Street shul, and now known as the Orencranz Cultural Center. Its bricks have absorbed the sounds, sights, and smells of many a generation since 1849, each with its own particular flavor, sound, sight, smell, and feel. Once it housed the German Ansche Chesed and later the orthodox Ansche Slonim. In recent years, it was saved from the wrecking ball by two brothers, Al and Angel Orencranz, Jewish artists from Spain.

Today, I think it is very appropriate that this parsha of Bamidbar is the parsha to which you were both called to the torah. After all, isn't the journey in the desert very much like the journey in real life? Aren't the trials that the Israelites endured in the desert so similar to a great deal of our everyday lives, the daily struggle, as my father used to call it. In the desert, the Israelites longed for the fleshpots of Egypt, complained about the manna, criticized Moses for marrying a Cushite wife, complained against the leadership of Moses and Aaron, complained about wilderness life, and were impatient during the march through Transjordan. The details, of course, vary, but our complaints about our own travails may make us appear as ungrateful, as the Israelites' complaints often appear to us. Of course, we may wish to be back in our own mythic past, imagining a paradise that never really existed; we may rail against real and perceived injustices; and, of course, we may be impatient to reach that fabled promised land, which never seems to come any closer to us than the horizon across the sea.

Undoubtedly there will be times in your joint journey that the surroundings will appear to be as barren as the desert and other times in which they will appear to be as fruitful and abundant as those of the promised land. However, regardless of your particular state of being at any moment in time, the covenant which will bind you, is not just the covenant that the people of Israel entered into in the desert 3 millenia ago. The covenant which the two of you will enter into is similar yet different because it is so personal. It is a binding solemn agreement, which involves mutual obligations, mutual responsibilities, and mutual respect of one to the other.

That sense of mutuality is a precious gift that each of you has given to the other. It is a mark of a true friendship and a true union. The Roman Senator, Cicero, remarked once, "The real friend is, as it were, another self." However, a thousand years before Cicero, 2 friends lived—the two friends about whom Dov Kleiner, Steven's brother, read in the Haftarah. We heard Jonathan's words, when he said, "The Eternal will be witness between you and me forever concerning the promise we made to each other."

In Pirkei Avot, we also read: "Whenever love depends on some material cause, with the passing of that cause, love too passes away; but if is not dependent on such a cause, it will never pass away.

Which love depended on a material cause? The love of Amnon and Tamar.

Which love depended on no such cause? The love of David and Jonathan."

It is that kind of friendship and that kind of love, Miriam and Steven, that, today, we all wish for the two of you.

Shabat shalom, Leon Hoffman

*Devar Torah*, shabbat before *Shavu'ot* 2001

Nancy Sinkoff

We have a paradox today. We have just completed the recitation of Leviticus, thus marking the end of the historical record of Revelation in our reading cycle, but yet here we stand, preparing for tomorrow night, to symbolically reenact the acceptance of Torah. The historical Israelites have received the Law, but we have not. Yet, like the Israelities, whose numbers and names we are told about in such great detail in today's parashah and stand ready to move forward in their journey towards the Promised Land, we stand ready to receive the Torah, our portable promised land. So the tension is elided.

But I want to speak about another tension, or tensions, between modernity and tradition.

It is somewhat fashionable to decry the word liberalism, particularly when it applies either to U.S. social policy, or to Jewish practice. I'm not going to speak -- *todah le-el* -- about U.S. social policy, but I am going to defend Jewish liberalism and I hope that I do so in a way that underscores the seriousness with which I approach the subject and why it does not deserve to be dismissed.

I want to speak, even boldly, about a fundamental belief of Judaism and to do so I'm going to use two terms, "monolatry," and "exclusivist monotheism." To give you a sense of where I'm going, I'm going to assert that we modern Jews today have much to learn from the Torah, meaning the Five Books of Moses, and the conception of God in its time; in fact, the Israelites' view of God, which was monolatrous, and not exclusively monotheistic.

For a long time within scholarly circles and still today in popular culture, it has been a given that the polytheistic world of the ancient near east and the "monotheistic" world of ancient Israel

were polar opposites. Polytheists, believers in a multitude of dieties, so the view went, were devoid of ethics and libertines *in gazen*, the dictionary definition conludes that a pagan is one who is "marked by a frank delight in and uninhibited seeking after sensual pleasure and material goods; an unrestrained irreligious hedonist and materialist." Biblical scholars had, therefore, an easy time considering the monotheism of Israel as superior, but they did so, as I have learned from a remarkable article by Edward Greenstein, Professor of Bible at Tel-Aviv University and former minyan member, by ignoring a body of substantial evidence which might have cast a more favorable light on Babylonian religious thought.[1] Ed argues, in short, that Biblical scholars erroneously compared Israelite epics to Canaanite myths, in which the genres themselves functioned completely differently. Looking at Ugarities epics, Ed continues, means that instead of finding "depraved pagans who were obsessed with fertility rites and steeped in the practices of sacred prostitution and human sacrifice," one will find gods who behave with more civilized manners, that is, like the God of Israel. Moreover, and perhaps more damning, if one looks carefully at the biblical text itself, one will find plenty of examples of myth embedded within the narrative, when the God of Israel doesn't quite behave Himself as one might hope. Just look at Genesis 6:1-4. "The gods of Canaan and the God of Israel appear much more alike, then, when we compare myth with myth and epic with stories of bygone eras." As Tykva Frimer-Kensky has argued, and I'll come back to her later, "the western denigration of paganism is not tenable. Paganism and its gods were concerned with a) proper order of the universe, b) regulation of history c) deliberate and understanding d) developed legal system and tradition of jurisprudence e) their worldview was comprised of moral deliberation, philosophical speculation, penitential prayer; ethical polytheism.[2]

These two conceptions of civilization have more in common than we have been led to believe.

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[1]Edward Greenstein, "The God of Israel and the Gods of Canaan: How Different Were They?"
[2]Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses*, p. 2.

So what about our belief in Israel's *unique* conception of God? The Bible does insist that the God of Israel is unique; see Deuteronomy 4:7, "Indeed, what [other] nation is so great that it has a god like the Lord, our God, so near whenever we call upon him?" But as any good preacher knows, if you spend a lot of time exhorting people about something, the something must be on your mind or, to say it another way, when the Rabbis and medieval *maggidim* exhorted Jews not to go to gentile courts, you can be sure that is just what the people were doing. Meaning, we need to remember that the Bible emerged out of ancient Near Eastern Society and as a polemic against it: its texts makes a point about Israel's God being different from the gods of Canaan precisely because the attributes of its God were similar to those they were rebelling against. Denial of Canaanite heritage: the Biblical text, thou doth protest too much! The Bible is an artful self-conscious construction. Disowned Egypt and Canaan by placing all of Israel's most important institutions in the desert.[3] Ed concludes his article with the bold statement that the Bible itself, the Five Books, not the later prophetic tradition, from second Isaiah forward, insists on only one thing: "that Israel worship its own God and not somebody else's." Meaning that Israel's relationship to God is unique in that it should only worship its God, because of the convental bond between Israel and God, NOT that Israel's God is superior to other gods.

Another important point emerges from this. And that is that in the Bible, there was a recognition that there were other gods that people worshipped and those gods had power. This is the concept of "monolatry" that I opened with.

As scholars far greater than I have shown and challenging the magesterial contribution of Yehezkial Kaufmann, it is very difficult to find "pure," exclusivist monotheism in the Bible, a belief that predicates that there is only one God. What is found in the Bible is the demand that Israel worship "ha-Shem" "to the exclusion of all other gods." We read in Exodus 20, "You

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[3]Daniel Sperling, "Israel's Religion in the Ancient Near East," p. 9.

shall have no other gods besides me," admitting of the existence of other gods. The unambiguous statements of exclusivist monotheism appear only later: in what is known as Second Isaiah: verses 43:10-13; 44:6-8; 45: 5-7; 14, 18, 21-22, 46:9).

So up until now, I've shown, albeit in a cursory fashion, our Torah speaks of a monolatrous relationship to "ha-Shem," and not a exclusivist one.

When the concept of exclusivist monotheism does emerge, in the later prophetic traditions, something is both gained and lost. What is gained, perhaps, is the comfort or superiority of triumphalism: "Ha-Shem" is the only God and has vanguished all other Gods. But is something lost in this later conception of God? Here I want to recommend Tikva's book *In the Wake of the Godesses*, where she articulates, in my mind, something so true about historical processes, and that is, and these are my words, not hers a) there are no Golden Ages because b) every worldview has assets and liabilities. For Tikva, who is fascinated by gender issues, the triumph of exclusivist monotheism meant that there is "no more chorus of cosmic powers;" the "God of Israel assumed *all* the functions of the previous gods, whether male or female.[4] She sees loss here, because "human suffering and toil were more understandable in a world in which the gods were perceived as in conflict than in one in which everything was supposed to reflect the will of a god both omnipotent and just."[5] In a world of "ha-Shem" alone the goddesses drop out, but so does a theodicy that is, perhaps, more explicable than the one we have to struggle with.

In other words, revolutions are wrought, and they are creative, but they always leave something positive behind from the world order or civilization they rebelled against. And the new world that they birth is not perfect.

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[4]Tikvah Frymer-Kensky, p. 86.
[5]Sperling, pp. 28-29.

Which leads me to today, the day before we stand at Sinai in the modern period.

As some of you know, I believe that the last quarter of the eighteenth century was the most important twenty-five years ever. Of course I'm grossly exaggerating, but bear with me. In that time, the modern period was born, a historical time that we are still living in -- post-modernist claims to the contrary notwithstanding. The earlier Scientific Revolution had much to do with the radical new understanding of both human ethical autonomy -- based on Kant's philosophy -- and the separation of Church and State, put into motion by first, the American Revolution, and, second, the French one, of the period. In any case, these dramatic changes amounted to a tectonic shift in the conception of God, which affected all thinking men and women of the time, and affects us now. No longer could one argue for an exclusivist theological position. No longer could one argue that one faith was absolutely true and the others were absolutely false. What was gained? Individual autonomy; a civil sphere in which, ideally, religion had no place; the concept of democracy and meritocracy and the end to feudal privilege; the possibility of equality of rights for all men and women, regardless of race, religion, or national origin. Tolerance. Staggeringly beautiful. Immensely hopeful. But, what was lost? The comforts of exclusivity, the belief that one's tradition was *the* Truth and the only Truth. The certainty that one's God was the only God, the most powerful God, the true God. Just like the Israelite revolution against polytheism entailed losses; the modern revolution entailed losses. And the same holds for the gains or assets of each transformation in culture. It was Somerest Maugham, right, who said, "you can't go home again." There is no return, the way I see it, to the exclusivist monotheism, born sometime in the period of 2nd Isaiah, and first mortally wounded by Spinoza, but then given its final rites in 1776. We, today, devoted observers of the covenantal bond with "ha-Shem" cannot but concede that we are not monotheists. We are monolatrists. We cannot but except the existence of other faiths, with their devotees, who consider their gods as true as we consider ours.

Our covenantal bond is unique to us because it is ours and true for us, not because it is the Truth.

If you are uncomfortable with this idea, take heart in that monolatry was the inheritance of your biblical forebears until the period of 2nd Isaiah. If such biblical fundamentalism doesn't appeal to you, then liken it to a marriage or a stable and loving relationship in which you are devoted to one partner, while you admit that there are other potential partners, even ones with powers (of intellect, sexual prowess, creativity), out there. Fortunately, that analogy has deep roots in the tradition; just listen to Hoshea's words, those that are said upon the laying of the *tefillin*: Hoshea 2:21-22:

"וארשתיך לי לעולם וארשתיך לי בצדק ובמשפט ובחסד וברחמים"

"And I will betroth you to me in justice, judgment, mercy and good deeds, and I will betroth you to me in faith, and you will know God."

שבת שלום וחג שבועות שמח

We just began, again, the book we call Bamidbar. This is the only book of the five for which the name is not the same as the word from which the name derives. The word in the Torah text is "b*i*midbar" but the name of the book is "B*a*midbar" because of a grammatical consideration when the word is separated from "Sinai." A trivial point, but one which creates a little aura around the name. The book of Vayikra, which we just completed, also has a peculiarity. The first word, vayikra, refers to God calling to Moshe and it is spelled defectively without a final aleph. But the name of the parshah, and often the first word itself, bear a tiny added aleph. There is a story to that involving Balaam. Once you know a little story about a name, it tends to stay with you.

Bamidbar began with a bewildering welter of names with associated numbers, all of which tend to blur together. Two names always stand out for me; Nachshon, because of the midrash regarding his willingness to jump into the Reed Sea as the pursuing Egyptians approached and Shelumiel, because of the story, which has no actual philological basis, in which his name is said to be the source of the term 'schlemiel.' Today, we were reminded of the tragic deaths of Nadav and Avihu, who died when they brought "strange fire" before God. While we tend to remember their names, we may be a little fuzzy about the other two sons, Elazar and Ithamar, because there is no comparable story for them. Back in the book of Shemot, we read (13:19) that "Moses took with him the bones of Joseph…" because of an oath Joseph had asked of the Israelites in Bereshit. A midrashic story is told of how Jacob's grand-daughter Serach was the only one still alive from the earlier generation who still knew where Joseph had been buried. I would imagine that Serach's task was not only to identify the spot but, more importantly, to retell the stories recounting what Joseph had done so that he came alive for that generation of Israelites who were then galvanized to disinter his bones.

In five days, on Shavuos, we will be saying Yizkor again. We will be recalling our lost loved ones via a time-honored communal ritual. But simply inserting Hebrew names at the designated points does not, in itself, re-call anyone. As we attempt to summon the dead, what licit witch of Endor do we use; what Orphic song makes Yizkor live up to its name of remembrance?

Stories are powerful and they are the vehicles of remembering and feeling. Walter Benjamin in his essay, *The Storyteller*, comments on "…what the nature of true storytelling is":

"The value of information does not survive the moment in which it was new. It lives only at that moment; it has to surrender to it completely and explain itself to it without losing any time. A story is different. It does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time… the more natural the process by which the storyteller forgoes psychological shading, the greater becomes the story's claim to a place in the memory of the listener, the more completely is it integrated into his own experience, the greater will be his inclination to repeat it to someone else someday, sooner or later…It is, however,

characteristic that not only a man's knowledge or wisdom, but above all his real life—and this is the stuff that stories are made of—first assumes transmissible form at the moment of his death… Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death."

In the ancient Greek and, by extension, in much of Western tradition, heroic exploits involving daring and death were accorded the highest respect. The Greek term "kleos" referred to a form of glory which would be never ending because, as the root of the word implied, the exploits would be 'heard' by the people in the form of stories and so a name would be preserved forever. This is what Achilles most coveted and the volumes of Homer and Edith Hamilton we all have testify to. In the Jewish tradition, "glory" is a term used only in reference to God. But we are made of the same frail stuff as the ancient Greeks and we attempt to partake of an aspect of divinity when we declare, in our way: "Shema Yisrael, hear O Israel, my name…remember, my name."

Jewish tradition sought to preserve memory through the totemic reuse of names and the retelling of stories across generations. In modern times, the Jews became enamored of preserving names in the form of brass and buildings in denial of the awareness that the name of the benefactor on a plaque gives way to that of another as soon as the building is renovated. In the final aliyah today, the sons of Kohath were charged with carrying the most holy objects of the mishkan in porterage on their shoulders whereas, elsewhere, the sons of Gershon and Merari were permitted to carry the less holy objects in wagons. The names of our lost loved ones can only be carried by us, not by plaques.

Only stories tinged with feeling provide a true Yizkor. Some may sentimentally insist that love alone is sufficient. Thornton Wilder concludes *The Bridge of San Luis Rey,* in which five people die in the collapse of a bridge, saying: "But the love will have been enough; all those impulses of love return to the love that made them. Even memory is not necessary for love. There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning." While, surely, love confers meaning on life, it is not sufficient for remembrance of the dead. Jacob Glatstein wrote of those lost in the Holocaust: "Who will dream You? Remember You? Deny You? Yearn after You? Who will flee You? Only to return over a bridge of longing?" His bridge requires specific memories in order to bear weight. There is no such thing as love in the abstract. When one struggles to be able to explain why someone was loved, inevitably we demonstrate our intimacy and their importance by resorting to stories. When Shir HaShirim (8:6) declares: "Love is as strong as death, its passion as unyielding as the grave" and Dylan Thomas writes: "Though lovers be lost, love shall not; and death shall have no dominion", they can only mean that the lost live through stories suffused with that love, which are, in fact, more imperishable than the love itself.

With the passage of time, as the lineaments of the faces blur and the photographs are misplaced and the inscriptions fade, the stories can remain. There is a Hasidic story about the centrality of stories.

"It was said that when some calamity was threatening his people, the Baal Shem Tov used to go to a certain holy place in the forest, light a sacred fire and say a special prayer. Thus, every time the calamity was averted.

Many years later, in the time of the Maggid of Mezritch, when such a threat arose again, he went into the forest and said: "Lord of the universe, I do not know how to light the sacred fire, but I still remember the holy place in the forest, and I still know the special prayer." When he returned home, the calamity was also averted.

Some years later, when Rabbi Moshe-Leib of Sasov found himself in trouble, he went to the forest and said: "God, I still know the holy place in this forest, but I do not know how to light the sacred fire and I do not know the special prayer." This time, too the tragedy was averted.

Finally, in the days of Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn, it was his turn to avert the calamity of his people. Sitting at home, he prayed to God from the depths of his heart: "I regret, Lord, that no one remains who knows that holy place in the forest or how to light the sacred fire or the special prayer. All I have is the story. Have pity on us and deliver us from danger." And God listened to his story and the calamity was averted again. The story was sufficient." And the story will always be sufficient against the greatest calamity, that of utter forgetting.

There is sorcery to the telling of stories. Whenever friends and relatives gather and tell stories of the deceased that are sad, wise or funny at a funeral or a shiva or a baby naming and tears or nods of heads or laughter ensue, we do, in fact, raise the dead. In this iPad age, we can instantly download a ring-tone but a feeling-tone still has to be acquired the old-fashioned way. There is no app for the persistence of loving memory.

There is something of great mystery in the ability of stories to summon up people so that we see and hear them again and long for them again because they have been made real again. This mystery is shared with the very nature of God. At the burning bush (Ex. 3:14), God tells Moshe that God's name is "Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh", which is not a noun at all but a verb meaning "I Am that I Am" in the sense of referring to a continuous ongoingness of being, pure inextinguishable existence, and representing both 'I-ness' and 'Am-ness', which humans are privileged to transiently emulate with self-conscious interiority and the experience of a personal 'I' who thinks. This unique self is what is tapped into when a story captures an aspect of a person.

Douglas Hofstadter, a cognitive and computer scientist and the author of *Godel, Escher, Bach,* wrote another book which explores more fully the question of how personal consciousness can arise from neuronal activity; that is, how mind can arise from brain. In *I Am A Strange Loop*, Hofstadter explains how complex neuronal activity, operating in a manner consistent with the paradoxical mathematical formulations of Kurt Godel's self-referential incompleteness theorem, enables the brain to develop symbolic mapping of the external world and to perceive patterns in a way that gives rise to a "strange loop" which is defined as a "paradoxical level-crossing feedback loop." This results in the epiphenomenon of "I" "...whose apparent solidity dominates the reality of everything else in the world." Hofstadter states: "In the brain model proposed here, the causal potency of an idea, or an ideal, becomes just as real as that of a molecule, cell, or a nerve impulse." More to our issue here, the author insists that "...we manufacture an enormously stripped-down version of our own strange

loop of selfhood and install it at the core of our symbols for other people, letting that initially crude loopy structure change and grow over time" so that "...a necessary and unavoidable consequence of this set of beliefs is that your brain is inhabited to varying extents by other I's..." That is, a neuronal pattern in the lost loved one's brain which was the substrate of some significant aspect of who they were and which conferred emotional valence within a relationship survives in a corresponding physical form in the brain of the partner of that relationship. Emotional attunement is neurological entwinement. Recalled stories literally, physically preserve vital aspects of lost loved ones.

Essentially the same claim is made in a humanistic, non-mathematical, non-neurological context by the author J.M. Coetzee when he writes in *Slow Man*: "Those into whose lives you are born do not pass away...You bear them with you, as you hope to be borne by those who come after you" or by the psychiatrist Irvin Yalom in his book *Staring At The Sun*, which deals with death anxiety, when he writes about the concept of "rippling" by which a person survives in their ongoing effects on others. Yalom quotes a mourner as saying of the deceased, "Look for her among her friends." John Donne anticipated Godelian neurology when he wrote: "Do not send to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee...."

As a physician, I have been called upon to pronounce individuals dead. For this, one ordinarily relies on the traditional criteria of the cessation of cardiac and respiratory activity. There are other, more controversial, medical definitions of death. I would like to propose that your final and complete existential death will not occur until the death of the last person who can recall your name and tell a story about you. Could you imagine a Yizkor service in which, in addition to each of us repeating the Hebrew names of the dead to ourselves, we took a few minutes to alternate telling stories to each other so that a cacophony of remembrance would make the room alive with the sound of the dead.

This must seem a <u>most</u> peculiar and melancholy celebration of the aufruf of Ari and Laura. But that is true only if we allow our dread of death to allow us to compartmentalize life. When I gave the second Baruch Bokser memorial dvar Torah chai years ago just around the time of my wedding anniversary, I said the following: "Is it not the custom for Chevraya Kaddisha to have their annual meeting on the anniversary of Moshe's death in Adar, the same month in which we celebrate Purim? And because of both we say, "Be happy it's Adar." And is it not so that the first day of Pesach and of Tisha b'Av always fall on the same day of the week? And was it not traditional for the same kittel to be worn on the day a man was married and on the night of the seder and on the day of his funeral? There is no contradiction between celebrating anniversaries and memorializing the dead. For what is an anniversary but the celebration of a friendship while two are alive; and what is a memorial but the celebration of a friendship when one is gone and others remain. There need be no fear of death when there is love, community, ritual and remembrance." And let me add now, that there need be no fear of life when one has a partner to journey with.

Nabakov's so-called last book, *The Original of Laura: A Novel in Fragments*, actually consisted of 138 index cards, some containing as few as a single word. The original intentions of the author can never be known and there is too little there to ever represent a sample of the strange loop

of Nabakov's self. No matter how much Ari may feel he loves Laura as their wedding approaches, he actually has but fragments of Laura. With the passage of years filled with sustaining love, he will recompose the original of Laura in his mind which will survive travel, time and travail. Joan Didion, in *The Year of Magical Thinking* (p.197), wrote after the death of her husband: "'You can love more than one person.' Of course you can, but marriage is something different. Marriage is memory, marriage is time. 'She didn't know the songs,' I recall being told that a friend of a friend had said after an attempt to repeat the experience. Marriage is not only time: it is also, paradoxically the denial of time. For forty years I saw myself through John's eyes. I did not age."

To Ari and Laura, entwined in each other's arms in love.

To Ari and Laura, entwined in each other's DNA, God willing, in their children.

To Ari and Laura, entwined in strange and loving loops.

May they become much storied as they continue their entwinement with us all.

Howard L. Berkowitz

May 15, 2010

**Dvar Torah Judy Oppenheim 5/23/15 Ten Days of Gratitude**

**Connection to the parshah**

In the parshahs we have been reading before Shavuot and those coming up the focus is on creating a nation and the rules, structures, philosophies and hierarchies need to make this happen.

Two Shabbats ago David Kraemer talked about not having physical blemishes as the criteria for priests, animals, and the accompanying knives involved with sacrifices. And that over time this evolved to not having mental disabilities.

Similarly, in last week's parshah the amount of money that people give varies by age and gender, and this week who goes to war varies by age. This is explained as being based on people's physical abilities including men being stronger than women, and younger men being stronger than boys or older men.

In our time, intellectual capabilities have taken over from physical strength in relation to income and wealth in most cases, and many roles in the military have nothing to do with physical strength. Times change, and religion, society, philosophies, institutions, and hierarchies change with them.

**Background**

Growing up I assumed that the way Judaism was practiced in my hometown of Brookline was the way it was practiced everywhere else, and that it had always been done this way. I was surprised to learn that my aunt used to wear sleeveless, that people in Israel didn't wear ties to shul, and on and on.

For a long time, I've been fascinated by how societies change, traditions evolve, and trends emerge. Growing up sukkot were decorated with strings of popcorn and cranberries, like Christmas trees, and over time this evolved to shiny ornaments from China that were also used for Christmas trees. And while trick or treating was OK for a modern Orthodox family when I was growing up, as the community moved to the right, it morphed into succah hopping where kids collect candy as they go from succah to succah. And Thanksgiving used to be celebrated on Thanksgiving, but among my more religious relatives Thanksgiving has moved to the Shabbat after Thanksgiving with traditional Thanksgiving food served at dinner. The

theory being that they celebrate thanksgiving every Shabbat.

More recently Yom Kippur has also become a national biking holiday as people can ride their bikes without having to worry about traffic. And the JCC here has changed the way we think about a Shavuout tikkun.

And just a few weeks ago I attended a tekkes maavar/a transition ceremony commemorating Yom Hazikoron and celebrating Yom Haatzmaut in one evening. I heard that this new tradition was started when moshavs in Israel didn't have the resources to create two separate ceremonies.

**Ein Prat**

I was intrigued when my niece told me about a new initiative from Ein Prat. How many people are familiar with Ein Prat? Here's how they describe themselves:

After national service Israelis have questions about their Jewish identity, Israel, and their goals for adulthood.

They're surrounded by media and societal rifts that conspire to sow dissatisfaction, pessimism and even apathy.

Ein Prat provides a platform for a powerfully positive alternative. Programs nurture their sense of themselves as Jews and Israelis, promote a sense of community among people of diverse backgrounds, and facilitate activities that express Jewish values and democratic ideals while adding value to society at large.

Ein Prat as a new kind of organization

Ein Prat epitomizes many shifts that are happening in our society.

1.Dissatisfaction with existing structures, hierarchies and paradigms, including dysfunctional governments, and religious factions

2. A greater sense of agency and purpose that individuals and groups can make a difference and good ideas and leadership can come from anywhere.

3. Lower barriers to change, including:
1.The democratization of knowledge
2.Digital resources make it easier to share

**Aseret ymai toda - 10 Days of Gratitude/Thanks**

Members of the Ein Prat community decided to create a new tradition, which they call aseret ymai toda or ten days of gratitude/thanks from Yom

HaShoah to Yom Haatzmaut. A takeoff on aseret ymai teshuva or the 10 days or repentance.

The Ten Days of Gratitude provides a chance to appreciate the accomplishment and successes of our nation. The goal is to encourage people to not only feel grateful but act grateful by thanking people and appreciating the good things in their lives.

After practicing it within Ein Prat they expanded to Israeli society last year. They created events throughout Israel, from evenings of learning and discussion to public encounters and interventions with the goal of turning gratitude into a cornerstone of our national calendar and a character trait of our society.

In this digital and media savvy age, they have been able to introduce their ideas quickly and broadly using their alumni, creating online tools for families, school and organizations; and creating awareness via huge blackboards at major intersections where people write what they're grateful for, as well as videos they've posted on YouTube and shared on social media.

Their website lists locations of gratitude events throughout the country during the ten-days, including where to learn about gratitude, where one can offer gratitude, and links to songs, videos and texts from a broad range of sources related to gratitude.

**Happiness Section**

Their video links include a TED talk by Shawn Achor, who taught positive psychology at Harvard. He said since most news is negative it leads our brain to think that's the accurate ratio of negative to positive news in the world.

He found it's not necessarily the reality that shapes us, but the lens through which our brain views the world that shapes our reality. And if you change the lens, you change your level of happiness.

If you can raise your level of positivity then your brain experiences a happiness advantage, raising your intelligence, creativity and energy levels.

**5 ways to do that include**

His top 5 ways to do that are:

Write 3 things your grateful for daily creating a pattern for scanning the world for positive rather than negative things

Journaling about one positive experience - giving your brain a chance to relive it

Exercise

Meditation

Random acts of kindness

He concludes that training your brain this way not only creates ripples of positivity, but a real revolution.

Coincidentally, I just read the book, "Do the kind thing" by Daniel Lubetsky, the founder of KIND bars and snacks and the son of a Holocaust survivor. He started the KIND Movement because he believes, the easier we make it for our community to surprise others with unexpected acts of kindness, the kinder our world will become.

**Pulling it together**

As we celebrate Shavuot this weekend it's a good time to be thankful for the gift of the Torah, and to think about how we can make this a kinder and happier world, as well as increase our personal level of happiness.

**Ending with thanks**

I want to end by thanking the minyan for welcoming me into this community. And I encourage everyone to thank someone at Kiddush and look for an opportunity to perform a random act of kindness today.

Yona Aut

Shabbat shalom.

It feels good to be here again. A lot has changed since I last gave a *d'var torah* to this *minyan* – or any *minyan*, for that matter. The year was 2001, it was the graduation *Shabbat*, almost exactly seventeen years ago.

Much like a little later today, we followed services with a celebratory Kiddush on the roof, (though due to weather, today's will likely be inside), and my friends and I imagined what the future beheld for all of us.

Later that fall, in the midst of the second intifada, I flew to spend the year in Israel. Two days after I landed, while my *Nativ* group was getting a tour of the "Mini Israel" replica of the State in Latrun, one of our counselors, an anglo-Israeli who at the time seemed so grown-up (he was 23 – and I want to just say one of the strangest signs of aging for an American who spent a significant portion of her childhood in Israel is when one stops thinking about Israeli soldiers as old and grown-up and realizes how tiny and young they suddenly are) reported the news that a plane had struck one of the Twin Towers. At the time, I recalled reading a New York Magazine article before I left home about how the flight paths in the City were dangerously crowded, and how a small plane was destined to accidentally hit a skyscraper at some point soon.

Little did we know.

And that was only the first four months since my last *drash*.

In the years since, I moved to Philadelphia, and then back to New York. And then back to Philadelphia. And then back to New York again.

I've failed the New York State Driver's License test three times. And then passed in Pennsylvania.

I adopted a young, beautiful, dachshund, named Sophie, when she was 2 and I was 23. At the time, I felt like an underage parent. She's now almost 14. I no longer feel too young to have a dog.

I have been a college student, a writer, a nanny, a medical student, a psychiatry resident, and now a child psychiatry fellow.

And most important of all, in the context of this *d'var torah*: John Cusack no longer holds either the personal nor cultural significance he did in 2001.

Which left me feeling a bit stuck. Without John Cusack, the centerpiece of my last *drash*, to rely on, what was I going to say?

No, but really, when I realized this week's *parsha* was the first in *Bamidbar*, I did feel paralyzed. I read the chapters over and over again, and had difficulty connecting. Generally, *Bamidbar*, the book which encapsulates the 38 years *bnei yisrael* wandered in the desert, is one that is glossed over in many Jewish day schools, or at least was in my own education.

As Rabbi Michael Strassfeld put it in *A Book of Life*, "There are no great moments in Be-midbar: No Exodus, no Sinai, just the complaints of daily life." He goes on to say, "For some of us, then, Be-midbar is that whole stretch of life between major life-cycle events." Which is lovely, and poetic, and significant in its own way, but also is exactly the opposite of a text that feels easy to connect with on the *Shabbat* of my *aufruf*, as Marcus and I prepare to embark on what will be one of the single most significant events of our lives.

And, even more specifically, this first, titular *parsha* is primarily made up of a census of each of the individual tribes of *bnei yisrael*, as well as the aggregate group as a whole.

If forty years of wandering is not particularly exciting, a census is even less so.

Still, over the past weeks, as I've ruminated about giving this talk, the text began to resonate more.

In many ways, this *parsha* is about how we construct, think about, and support our communities. In it, after completing the census of Israelites 20 years and up, G-d tells Moses how the community of Israel will be formed, with the Levites surrounding the *mishkan*, and then specific tribes to the east, south, west and north.

While I think very little about censuses, I think a lot about community, mainly because of what I grew up with in this room.

In discussing the first portion of Be-Midbar, Nechama Leibowitz explains that this is not even the first census taken of the children of Israel, but the second, the first being in Exodus when the sockets of the *mishkan* were constructed from the proceeds of money contributed by the counted individuals. "Why," she asks, "had Moses been commanded so solemnly to number them a second time, on this particular date?"

She then quotes the Rambam explaining the line, בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל כָּל־עֲדַת אֶת־רֹאשׁ שְׂאוּ -- "Take the number of all the congregation" -- who explains that this is a specifically military census, furthered by the fact that the Levites were not included in these numbers. But then Leibowitz asks, if the goal was simply to provide the number of men available to go into battle, why did the Torah go into so much detail amongst each of the tribes, naming each of the sons of Jacob and writing of each מִבֶּן שֵׁמוֹת מִסְפַּר וּמַעְלָה שָׁנָה עֶשְׂרִים כֹּל צָבָא יֹצֵא or "According to the number of names from the age of twenty years and upwards, by their polls." What is the

importance of knowing each individual name if we are simply intending to tally men for war? What is the meaning of "by their polls?"

Nachmanides, one-time leader of Spanish Jewry, and a personal favorite since I wrote a fourth grade biography on him, posits as one possible reason,

> **I have further seen in Bamidbar Rabbah on the text "With the number of their names ... by their polls" as follows: The Holy One blessed be He ordered Moses to number them in a manner that would confer honour and greatness on each one of them, individually. Not that you should say to the head of the family: "How many are there in your family? How many children have you?" But rather all of them should pass before you in awe and with the honour due to them and you should number them. That is what is meant when it states: "According to the number of names from the age of twenty years and upwards *by their polls*."**

Nehama Leibowitz writes, "Nahmanidies emphasizes that the census was personal and individual "according to their polls" impressing on us the value and sterling worth of each and every soul which is a unique specimen of divine creativity and a world of its own."

She quotes from Isaac ben Moses Arama's *Akeidat Yitzchak* where he writes:

**They were not just like animals or material objects, but each one had an importance of his own like a king or a priest and that indeed God had shown special love towards them and this is the significance of mentioning each one of them by name and status; for they were all equal and individual in status.**

This lesson feels acutely important in this day and age, and for me, felt particularly central over the past two weeks. Though this is my author drash, as in ~~life~~ Judaism, and life, there is some bitter with the sweet.

At 1:30 AM on Monday, May 6th, as the weekend was drawing to a close, my phone rang through ear buds in my ear. I was sleeping, but as usual had put on a podcast to help me fall asleep, and so I heard the ring. I saw that the call had been made by one of the current chief residents in the adult psychiatry residency program I graduated from this past July. I initially ignored the call, but because in my field you never know when a patient may have ended up in the emergency department and a colleague needs some collateral information from you, I decided to send a quick text.

"Hi Jen! Assuming you called by mistake, but missed a call from you. All OK?"

I expected to hear nothing in response, but a second later got, "Do you have a minute to talk?"

During that phone call, she told me that a current second year resident, a woman who had been an NYU medical student, who I had helped recruit to the psychiatry program, and who I had mentored last year when I was one of the chief residents myself, had committed suicide the day before.

The loss was, and remains, devastating. Devastating because Emma was 31, a talented psychiatrist, and a wryly funny lady with a sweet smile.

But also devastating because of how closely intertwined we are with the members of our community, how each individual impacts its function. And yet it has also been a reminder of how significant it is to have a community when facing something major, whether tragic or wonderful.

Another lesson I learned from the people in this room today.

In the case of my residency community's recent loss, it has been a reminder that it is our duty to check in on each other a little more. As psychiatrists, it is terrifying to lose a colleague in this way, when often our days are spent assessing the risks of our patients. But also as psychiatrists, we realize how imperfect a science those triages are, how preventing all suicides is likely impossible, and how important it is to help those around you however you can, when you can.

In psychiatry, we talk about "preventative factors" when we talk about suicide risk, and a good support system is among the most important ones.

So at work, while systemic changes are being slowly put into place (physician burnout is a real issue: a study from JAMA in 2010 following 740 interns entering training found that 3.9% met screening criteria for depression in July, whereas over the course of the year at 3 month intervals an average of 25.7% met criteria for depression based on the same screening tool; and the suicide rate among male physicians is 1.4 times that of the general population. Among female physicians it is about 2.3 times higher – but that is for another talk, for another day.) while systemic changes are being slowly put into place, smaller changes among my colleagues have begun.

We are hugging more. Encouraged by bosses, we collectively played hooky on Wednesday and went to the movies and then lunch. In the adult program that I graduated from, faculty pitched in and helped lighten the call burden over the last weeks while the residents mourned. In turn, the residents made the faculty dinner last night.

These changes are small, but they are significant. And in so many ways, they are reminiscent of what I learned about the importance of community and how it functions, not only from *Be-Midbar*, but from growing up in this one. From watching people shout "*mazel tov*" at namings and aufrufs and bar and bat mitvahs week after

week, year after year. From people crowding into apartments to make *shiva minyans* whenever an email or announcement arrived. From eating hundreds of Shabbat lunches and dinners at your homes, and having so many of you sit around my parents' table with us.

The third chapter of this *parsha* begins with the line "ומשה אהרן תולדת ואלה." "These are the descendants of Aaron and Moses." But then, the chapter goes on to list only the sons of Aaron, describing the deaths of Nadav and Avihu, and the work of Eleazar and Ithamar as *kohanim*. Moses's children, are not mentioned.

"But it mentions only the sons of Aaron!" Rashi proclaims. He goes on to reference Sanhedrin 19b, explaining, "But they are called the sons of Moses because he taught them the Torah. This tells us that whoever teaches the Torah to the son of his fellow man, Scripture regards it to him as though he had begotten him."

If such is the case, then so many here are like parents to me. It is in some ways difficult to name names individually, because the reality is so many in this room helped shape me in large and small ways – truly, if I have sat where you are, listening to a *drash* you've given, you were a part of it.

But I will name a few here, because one the lessons I took away from this *parsha* is how specifically important each individual is in creating a community, and how crucial it is to recognize that.

Debbie and Marty Greenberg, and Eileen Leistner and Barry Winiker, who were members of a "Shabbat Group" with my parents long before we joined *minyan ma'at*, and who were some of the very first people who taught me what it means to be a part of a community, and how meaningful it is to have friends who become family.

Naomi and Chaim Steinberger, who have known me since Tamar and I befriended each other at three years old. Remember when I reference an essay about Ramban I wrote in fourth grade? Naomi helped me research it at JTS. And I emailed her about a research question when writing this, too.

Dorothy Weiss, who stayed up with me late into the night and helped me make it through some of my first sleepovers. And, Michael who invited me to shadow him while I tried to decide whether or not to go to medical school (and taught me where the best Italian food in Borough Park is). Both of which were extremely important lessons.

Yoko Cohen and Joshua Halberstam, with whom I've spent innumerable holidays and shabbatot, and who taught me about philosophy and Judaism and most importantly, humor.

And to think of all of the people here who let me care for your children, many of whom are now themselves adults, and in turn taught me how to be caring and both

directly and indirectly inspired me to want to continue doing that sort of work for the rest of my life – here I will almost definitely leave people off, but the Dreiblatts (Gary gets double credit, as he also taught me science throughout my childhood), the Breitman-Shapiros, the Kurzweil-Kulas, the Ben Haim-Cirlins, the Gerwin-Gersteins, the Cowan Jacobs, the Lysses – all immediately come to mind.

And of course to my actual parents, Janet Heettner and Peter Silverman, who gave me this community, and who have taught me almost all of the Torah I know, including the secular parts.

Thank you to all of you.

As I stand here, on the brink of my wedding, about to marry Marcus Cohn, who I am sure you will all grow to know and love if you do not already, and to join his family (who I am lucky enough to love almost as much as I do him), and as we prepare to set out together to establish our own community – as it happens, in Brooklyn, with the rest of your children – I will continue to carry you with me, as I always have. And will continue to consider myself a part of this community, too.

Unlike John Cusack, your relevance has persisted.

Before I finish, I would like to quickly reference that year I spent in Israel one more time. That year, my *Nativ* group moved from Jerusalem to *kibbutz Sa'ad*, one of the

kibbutizim in the *Negev* desert that closely borders Gaza. At the time, there had been no action at that border since the establishment of the Israeli State, though that spring things changed, and the first *kassam*, or missle, from Gaza to the State of Israel landed in the fields of *Sa'ad* a few days after our arrival. Again, this was in 2001, before the disengagement. At the time, I did not fully understand the desperation of the inhabitants of the Gaza strip.

I still don't, but counter-intuitively, I do think about it more. Maybe I have my teacher Anya Rous to thank for that.

I don't plan to politicize this talk, but spending the past weeks reading this *parsha* about a people wandering in the desert, yearning for home, which initially seemed so distant from today's reality, began to resonate more and more as the news of this week progressed, and I felt remiss not mentioning that.

If I can end with one wish, or one prayer, it is that all who are currently struggling to find a safe place to call home do so, and do so safely.

Amen.

Minyan Ma'at. D'var torah for B'midbar

I've never given a dvar torah here, mostly because while I like to think I know something about torah in the simple sense of learning, I am self-conscious about knowing next to nothing about the Torah, THE Midrash, rabbinics, or, for that matter, tanakh. Then I was reminded of a joke I'm guessing many of you know, the punchline of which is "look who thinks he's a nobody."

The rabbi opens the aron kodesh (the ark) to pray for his congregation and says: God, I am unworthy, I am nothing, I am nobody. But Please grant my prayer.
The chazan then stands before the aron kodesh and says: God, I too am unworthy, I am nothing, I am nobody. Please grant my prayer.
The shamas gets up before the aron kodesh and says: God I am unworthy, I am nothing, I am nobody.
And the rabbi turns to the chazan and says :"Look who thinks he's a nobody."
The joke reminded me that there's a kind of hubris in claiming to be nobody.

So . . . I don't want to talk about counting people and certainly not about the whoring women of the haftorah. Instead, I'd like to talk about what it means to be in the desert, to be taking a difficult journey from one place to another, uncertain of whether we'll get there. Understandably, we tend to think of this in psychological terms: a difficult path we have taken in our personal lives, perhaps a scary path away from what enslaves us individually, our own Egypts. I'm struck by how many people have to work hard in this parsha and elsewhere: what skills and how many people does the community have to have to build the mishkan or, here, to count and add up to 603,550?

There's a Yiddish poem by one of my favorite poets—Yankev Glatshteyn—that I think reflects profoundly on what it means for a people—the Jews—to be in the desert. It was published in 1948 and it's called "In mitn veg"—in the middle of the way.

It is a poem about being enroute, unsure of what we'll find. It reminds me of the beginning of Dante's Inferno:

*In the middle of the journey of our life*
*I found myself within a dark forest*
*Where the straight way was lost.*

Dante is talking about wandering, about sin, about what we too prosaically call a midlife crisis questioning everything. Midbar/ The desert, too, is that middle ground, but Glatshteyn is not talking about a person's journey but the journey of a people.

I'd like to read the poem in Yiddish, as you follow along in either Yiddish or English.

"In the Middle of the Road,"
by Yankev Glatshteyn (1948)

Could you hush the drums a bit
Until we, the desert generation, die out.
Be patient with us.
Could you slow your pace a bit,
Let them think that we, too, will arrive.

We shall not get there.
We cannot get there.
The road to forgetful joy is too long.
When we fall, lift us up,
Carry us like Holy Books of sadness.
If we die,
Bury us in the idle of the road,
Like pieces of parchment.

And if you show some disrespect,
Let it not be held against you.
Generation of singing intransigence.
If we remain alone,
The night will fall on our bones
And cover our graves.
And when our graves disappear,
You will become a people
Of orphaned joy.

Without fatherly, gentle sadness.
But our sadness is not merely gentle.
It is full of strength. Without us,
You are a childish people
With a silly, paper God.

◄ אין מיטן וועג

שטילט אַ ביסל אײַן דעם פויקן-מאַרש,
ביז וואָנען מיר, דער דור-המידבר, וועלן אויסשטאַרבן,
זײַט געדולדיק צו אונדז.
פאַרלאַנגזאַמט אײַערע טריט,
זאָל מען מיינען אַז מיר וועלן אויך אָנקומען.

מיר וועלן נישט דערגרייכן.
מיר קענען נישט דערגרייכן.
דער וועג צו פאַרגעסנדיקער פרייד איז לאַנג.
אַז מיר וועלן פאַלן הויבט אונדז אויף,
טראָגט אונדז ווי הייליקע ספרים פון טרויער.
אויב מיר וועלן שטאַרבן,
באַגראָבט אונדז אין מיטן וועג,
ווי שטיקער פאַרמעט.

און טאָמער וועט איר אונדז פוגע-כּבֿוד זײַן,
זאָל אײַך נישט גערעכנט ווערן,
דור פון זינגענדיקער עקשנות.
טאָמער וועלן מיר בלײַבן אַליין,
וועט די נאַכט פאַלן אויף אונדזערע ביינער
און פאַרהוילן אונדזערע קברים.
און אַז אונדזערע קברים וועלן אָפּגעמאַקט ווערן,
וועט איר ווערן אַ פאָלק
פון פאַריתומטער פרייד,

אָן פאָטערלעכן, צערטלעכן טרויער.
אָבער אונדזער טרויער איז נישט נאָר צערטלעך.
נאָר אריך קרעפטיק. אָן אונדז
זענט איר אַ קינדיש פאָלק
מיט אַ נאַרישן, פאַפּירענעם גאָט.

It's just three years after the end of the war. (War for me always means WWII, though we are all painfully aware of all the other wars we are **not** yet past). It's after the war. And it was written almost immediately after the founding of the State of Israel. The drums the poet asks to hush are the fanfare that accompanied the creation of the State. He is by no means opposing that creation. (On the contrary, Glatshteyn celebrated Israel even as he lamented its antagonism to Yiddish.)

So . . . let's look at some of the questions the poem raises and leaves largely unanswered.

1. First there's the question of who "you" are in the first line. Who are you? Is this a collective or individual you? You all have to answer that for yourselves. In any case, in this poem Glatshteyn forcefully rejects the notion that the people wandered for 40 years because they had sinned, or because they were somehow not fit to enter the Promised Land. He's also asking, if that took 40 years, what transformation do we expect to happen in only three years?

It's worth noting that, in the Yiddish, this is not a request (could you) but rather a command (hush the drum roll)

2. Then there's the question of who "we"—the desert generation—of the second line refers to? Is it those who have survived the war? Is it all Jews of all times? Again, the implication is that both are true.

Glatshteyn has another haunting poem that appears in some siddurim and makhzorim.

נישט די מתים לויבן גאָט

די תורה האָבן מיר מקבל געווען ביים סיני,
און אין לובלין האָבן מיר זי אָפּגעגעבן.
נישט די מתים לויבן גאָט,
די תורה איז געגעבן געוואָרן צום לעבן.
און אַזוי צוזאַמען ווי מיר זיינען אַלע באַזאַמען
געשטאַנען ביי מתן־תורה
אַזוי וואָר זיינען מיר אַלע געשטאָרבן אין לובלין.

We received the Torah on Sinai,
And in Lublin we gave it back.
The dead do not praise God,
The Torah was given for life.
And just as we all stood together at the giving of the Torah,
So did we all die in Lublin.

That's the logic of our history: if we were there at Sinai, how are we NOT there in Lublin?

But Glatshteyn knows full well that we did NOT all die in Lublin and here and elsewhere he refers to constant new beginnings. "From beginning to beginning to beginning" is a refrain of another one of his poems.

All of this deliberately confuses the YOU and WE. We may have all been there at the giving of the Torah and we may all be part of the desert generation, but we did not die in the desert. So what's next?

3. There's a lot that's next: there's mourning, memory, history, poetry.
    a. Jews know all too well how to mourn. Mourning takes time, it doesn't follow a set pattern. Mourners can never be told when it's time to stop mourning, though we're told—literally—when to get up and move.
    b. Memory: We're also told not to forget. Glatshteyn is certainly invoking ZAKHOR: calling on us to remember the past.

c. History: Jewish history is both circular and linear. Linear in its waiting for the Messiah – a messiah in which Glatshteyn did not believe. But it's also circular in our celebrations and commemorations: yizkor, hagim, shabbat. Invoking the Biblical desert generation, Glatshteyn reminds us that we should not make of Israel an idol, we should not see it in messianic terms, as if all of Jewish history has inevitably led here and has somehow redeemed the past.

And in invoking genizahs ("bury us like pieces of parchment"), I think Glatshteyn is also pointing to the power of the written word that **contains** memory, mourning, and history.

- And also reminding us – at the end – that it's not the parchment that matters, but rather what we remember of what's on the parchment and what we do with that.
- If we disappear, you will be orphaned. There's no joy in that!
- without us you are a childish people with a silly, paper God. It's an assertive ending that speaks of the strength and the power of the words and the history.

And it matters that the generation that enters the Promised Land is brought there and is dependent on those who didn't live to get there – the ones who packed up, who built, and who counted in both the literal sense of having counted up the people and in the sense of counting, mattering.

These days, when there are those who pervert history – in Russia and here and seemingly everywhere – it's worth getting history right. These days, when there are some who think they must rebuild the Temple and perform sacrifices, it's worth going back to interpret the words that have so terribly misled them and get **them** right.

Everything, of course, is open to interpretation. Meaning is in the eyes of the beholder. But it's not ONLY there. One of the hardest things I've encountered about teaching literature is telling students that their interpretations are just plain wrong. I ask them to go back to the text, to the words, and show me how and why they understood it. Glatshteyn is asking us to do a much more sophisticated version of that.

The first line of our parsha has nothing to do with counting. Instead, it says *V'yidaber adonai el moshe b'midbar*. [and God said to Moses in the *midbar*] It's worth remembering that *midbar* is wilderness, but has the same root as word, to speak. God said to Moses through his words. *Midbar* also has the same root as *dever*/pestilence. These days talking about pestilence is a little too close to home, except to say that words may be contagious, even deadly, as we know all too well.

I think we can understand Glatshteyn's poem as a midrash on the parsha. *V'yidaber adonai el moshe b'midbar*. Are words/speaking/writing – are words our way out of the wilderness? Perhaps, but it takes a lot of work too.

Gut shabbes/shabbat shalom

**Bamidbar: Decoration Day**

Shabbat shalom—or gut shabbos, as the case may be.

Once again, we are setting off on our reading of sefer Bamidbar—making this, as I like to think of it, Season 2,536 of "Lost." This is, I have to tell you, my favorite book of the Torah. I lack the Jewish education to have a favorite parshah—seriously—but of the five books, Bamidbar really is my favorite. All of the weirdest, most crazy and disturbing stuff happens in this book. Talkative donkeys. Bronze serpents. A rebellion that's so confused, you can't tell who's fighting against what. And, for the major new piece of legislation, the ritual of the red heifer, which nobody understands. All this, while the people are moving around and yet going nowhere—which gives Bamidbar a modern tinge of existentialism, even while it's being lurid and uncanny.

You can see, I hope, why sefer Bamidbar might be attractive—except for parashat Bamidbar itself. On first glance, the only interesting thing you can find in this parsha is the suggestion that God is maybe a little OCD.

Here is what Rashi has to say: "Because the Israelites were dear to God, He counts them every now and then." I acknowledge the gender-marked language and apologize in advance for maintaining it. I'm just trying to stay close to the text. Rashi continues: "When they went forth from Egypt He counted them; when many fell because of the golden calf He counted them to find out how many were left; when He was about to make His Presence dwell among them, he took their census again; and shortly after the Mishkan was set up, on the first day of Iyar, he counted them."

But, as I read this parsha, I have to wonder: Does God count the Israelites because He loves them, or does He love counting itself? First we have the census of the tribes—

the sum in each one of the men fit for combat—and the grand total. Then we learn about the geometric pattern God wants to make with the tribes and the numbers are repeated, every last one, almost as if God had ordered them to be counted again to make sure they were still all there. Then the Levites have to be counted. Then the first-born of the rest of the Israelites have to be counted. And then, if we want to look ahead to next week, the three main families of the Levites are going to be numbered all over again, this time counting only the men between the ages of 30 and 50.

According to the Midrash, we can even deduce from the text that, whereas God commands the Israelites to conduct a census of themselves, when it comes to the Levites He jumps in and does the job on His own. You can almost sense God saying, "All right, get out of the way. I'll do it Myself."

What are we to make of all this counting, and shuffling of categories, and recounting? The first thing to leap out at me is that the numbers are not symbolic. We are not in a situation where the Israelites just happen to find 12 springs of water and 70 palm trees. We are in a situation where there are 46,500 men of Reuben, 59,300 men of Shimon, 45,650 men of Gad—rounded-off numbers, maybe, but irregular and relatively precise. And the total of the first-born males in Israel? 22,273.

What is being impressed upon us here, I think, is that we are reading a documentary record. Not a history—this is still too early for history—but a record of actual events. And this accords with the impression you get at the beginning of the parshah from the list of names of the tribal leaders. In his commentary on Bamidbar, Jacob Milgrom notes that the names in this list are unusual—16 of the 24 never recur in

the Tanach—and all of them are extremely old. To Milgrom—and who am I to disagree with him?—these features of the text are evidence of a strain of realism in Bamidbar.

That's what I want to talk about—this residue of the contingent and the particular, within an overall narrative that is mythic and symbolic. That's my theme. But, before I get to it, I first want to tell you why I don't like the name Memorial Day.

It used to be Decoration Day. That's what it was still called when I was growing up—and I adhere to the infallible principle that the way things were when I was a kid is the way they always used to be and are supposed to remain. This Memorial Day business didn't really start becoming popular until after World War II. And it became official only in 1967. Just when you'd have expected Congress to get people's minds off of body counts by replacing Decoration Day with a name that was all connotation, expressing nothing but a vague, encompassing aura of patriotism. What does Memorial Day mean? The celebration of the Indy 500.

But Decoration Day meant something real. It was the day for decorating the graves of the war dead. It had all sorts of symbolic purposes too, of course—some of them not so helpful. In 1913, at Gettysburg, Decoration Day was the occasion for a 50th anniversary commemoration of the battle. The Union and the Confederacy were reconciled during a four-day "Blue-Gray Reunion"—much to the benefit of the Southerners, and their propaganda for the nobility of their Lost Cause. But this example just shows us what we all know, that any symbolic act can be misappropriated. The essential element of Decoration Day, I repeat, was the marking of graves—and that's important.

In this regard, I think it's relevant to recall the first known instance of such a commemoration. In 1865, immediately after the end of the Civil War, the liberated African Americans of Charleston, South Carolina, went to the site of a mass grave of Union soldiers, dug up the corpses, and reburied them all in individual graves. Then on May 1, 1865, they returned by the thousands to honor the dead and to celebrate what those soldiers had achieved, one by one, through their sacrifice.

The 46,500 men of Reuben we read about in Bamidbar, the 59,300 men of Shimon, the 45,650 men of Gad—these were soldiers, counted one by one. This is a military census. And here, at the start of sefer Bamidbar, these individuals are being shaped up to go to war. That's the terrifying irony. Except for one idiotically misconceived, impromptu raid, none of these men will actually die in battle. Instead, they will die wandering in the wilderness—and nobody will ever commemorate their graves. Put it this way: We know the names of the Israelites who went down to Egypt from Canaan—the males, at any rate. We read them at the beginning of sefer Sh'mot. But at the beginning of sefer Bamidbar, when the Israelites are supposedly poised to return to Canaan, we have only aggregate numbers—the numbers of those who are about to be lost. No names, no identity, no honor—but a residue of contingency, to suggest to us that yes, they actually existed.

If there is a hint of OCD behind this account—I was only half-joking when I made that suggestion—then maybe it's because there's also anxiety, which is what OCD tries to control. Maybe it's the anxiety that comes from knowing our fathers are out there, lying nameless in unmarked graves, and we have no way to connect with them. We love to talk about Jewish continuity, and think about tracing our ancestry all the way back to

Abraham and Sarah. So, yes, we have every reason to feel uneasy, as we think about the way the generations are interrupted—with nothing but trackless wilderness where there should have been 603,550 individual men, and who knows how many women.

What can I say about this anxiety, this sense of loss, on our Decoration Day weekend? I say that I can imagine these soldiers at the beginning of Bamidbar, standing with their regimental banners, squared up neatly as if for a parade. Think of how glorious they might have looked. I say that it's right to feel anxiety and sorrow at their loss—even though they never went into battle as they were supposed to. They died not to win anything, but because they were wayward and stupid and rebellious—but they were our fathers. We ought to want to commemorate them.

But since we can't, except in census figures, we might think instead about what it is that enables us to observe Decoration Day. What makes it possible is that the fighting stops. What makes it possible is the coming of peace—something that these soldiers never knew, any more than they knew war.

So, even though it's Decoration Day weekend, and even though Bamidbar appears to be preparing for a great conquest, I want to close with something for Armistice Day—something for peace. Here, to enable commemoration, is a poem by a writer of Jewish background, Siegfried Sassoon, written about the ending of World War I. Sassoon was a veteran of the Western front who knew personally the meaning of the words "Lo ha-meitim y'hallelu-ya, v'lo kol yordei dumah." Here is a poem he wrote recalling the moment of the Armistice; a visionary poem, something of hope, but with a residue of lived experience:

Everyone suddenly burst out singing;
And I was filled with such delight

As prisoned birds must find in freedom,
Winging wildly across the white
Orchards and dark-green fields; on; on; and out of sight.

Everyone's voice was suddenly lifted;
And beauty came like the setting sun;
My heart was shaken with tears; and horror
Drifted away…O, but every one
Was a bird; and the song was wordless; the singing will never be done.

Shabbat shalom.

I turned sixty just a couple of months ago. Two weeks after my birthday, I went to purchase tickets for *Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day*. In this film Frances McDormand plays a middle-aged spinster in 1939 who, in taking a housekeeper job, is transformed and transforms others within the space of twenty-four hours. I almost always purchase movie tickets on-line, but this particular time I had an opportunity to buy them at the box office. The ticket clerk, who looked to be about twelve, asked me, "Will that be a senior ticket?" I was taken aback by this and actually didn't even know the minimum age to qualify for a senior discount. I said to him, "Look at my face and you tell me!" He did so, said "Definitely, a senior" and I have felt the need to write this dvar Torah ever since. This desire was reinforced by our family's trip to Barcelona for my birthday. To learn that the rain in Spain does not fall mainly on the plain at my age certainly gave me pause to re-examine other, more important beliefs. Given that Philip Roth, during the celebration of his birthday at Columbia's Miller Theater on April 11th, was moved to say, "Seventy-five; how sudden," I realized I had better start pondering my situation.

This parshah, Naso, begins with a continuation of the discussion of the duties of the Levites from the end of parshah Bamidbar, in which we learn that the Levites from thirty to fifty years of age are to be numbered by census. That is, all of the Levites were considered unfit to continue in their primary duties after the age of fifty and so shifted into more sedentary "senior" positions. Two weeks ago, in Bechukotai, we read (Lev. 27:3-7) how when one vowed the monetary equivalent for a male twenty to sixty years of age, his worth was fifty shekels but once the man was over sixty, he was only worth fifteen shekels. Now, while one can seek comfort in knowing that fifty or sixty represented a considerably more advanced age in that ancient era , it still gives one pause. Tom Stoppard, in writing of Syd Barrett of the Pink Floyd for his play *Rock n Roll,* said: "...every story, made-up or otherwise...is secretly about time, the disinterested ongoingness of everything, the unconditional mutability that makes every life poignant." It is the awareness of this mutability that confers the universal sense of time speeding up as one ages and makes more urgent consideration of how we are spending our one and only life.

And so for the question of intellectual honesty and emotional authenticity I wish to consider today I shall use the final pasuk of the parshah: "When Moses went into the Tent of Meeting to speak with God, he would hear the Voice addressing him from above the cover that was on top of the Ark of the Pact between the two cherubim; thus God spoke to him." Given that we will not be vouchsafed transcendent moments with God as recorded in the Torah and the age of prophecy is long since over, where do we stand with "God-talk?" Do we simply consider references to God in divrei Torah as an accepted and comforting but quaint convention? Do we give as little thought to the innumerable references to God during the davening as we do to the prayers for the restoration of the Temple sacrifices which we, presumably, have no actual interest in perpetuating? Does our modern rationalism allow for any respectability to the consideration of God?

Now I celebrate the fact that the exact center of the Torah by word count falls between the words doraysh/dorash, "inquired inquiringly," in Vayikra 10:16, wherein Moshe is seeking to find out why the goat of sin offering had not been eaten by Aaron after the deaths of his sons Nadav and Avihu. The center of gravity of our endeavors as Jews is to doraysh/dorash-to question and search out ceaselessly for ourselves, as individuals. In fact, these few psukim constitute the first demonstration of the process of

the oral Torah and how the human role in interpretation supersedes God's when Moshe, who has learned about the sin offering directly from God, now accepts Aaron's explanation of his deviation as a legitimate exception to a general rule. Antithetical to this process and to the intellectual traditions of Judaism and the rationality of which we moderns are so proud is the statement of Tertullian, one of the early church fathers, who said "I believe because it is absurd" and "The Son of God was born: there is no shame, because it is shameful. And the Son of God died: it is wholly credible, because it is ridiculous. And, buried, He rose again: it is certain, because impossible." These are certainly not Rabbinic sentiments. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the chief Rabbi of England, in his Haggadah commentary, notes that "…Biblical Hebrew has no word that means 'to obey.' The word used by the Torah is shema, which means 'to listen attentively to and act accordingly.' Judaism does not demand blind obedience"…or blind faith.

James Kugel, a great scholar, in his magisterial *How To Read The Bible,* explicitly describes his allegiance to both the best of modern Biblical criticism as based on archaeological findings and historical textual examination and his commitments as a modern Orthodox Jew. He writes: "…I am a believer in the divine inspiration of Scripture and an inheritor of many of the traditions of ancient interpreters cited in this book, indeed, a keeper of the Jewish Sabbath, dietary laws, and all other traditional practices…" but he goes on to later add: "My own view…is that modern biblical scholarship and traditional Judaism are and must always remain completely irreconcilable." He concludes the book with: "So, while I could not be involved in a religion that was entirely a human artifact, it would, in theory at least, be enough for me if God said what [God] is reported to have said in Exodus and Deuteronomy: 'Do you want to come close to Me? Then do My bidding, become my servants.'" These forms of understanding, which he acknowledges as ultimately incompatible, reside side by side in him without his feeling false to the one or the other. Though F. Scott Fitzgerald said "the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function," we still want reassurance that this differs from a state of confusion.

In 1848, Karl Marx in the *Communist Manifesto* wrote presciently of the modern condition: "All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, and all that is holy is profaned…" Marx, in a fever dream, could not imagine the frenzied pace of change and the extent of commodification and commercialization in our day. With the passage of time, we came to see Marxism as the opiate of the intellectuals and the rationale of tyrants, but the social insight stands. I confess I cannot abide a world in which all that is solid melts into air.

In Act III of King Lear, the mad king is wandering on the storm-driven heath accompanied only by Kent and his court Fool when they come upon the miserable hovel of Edgar, who is pretending to be a poor Tom O'Bedlam in order to survive. When Lear sees the foul, nearly naked madman, he groans out: "Is man no more than this? … Thou art the thing itself: unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor bare, forked animal as thou art." (III:iv) Culture, civilization, community and a means of understanding the world in which we find ourselves are as essential as clothing and shelter for survival. When young, we tend to agree with the young, impetuous Hamlet, that "readiness is all;" a readiness for action, if only we can figure out what that ought to be. When older and of

a more mature perspective, we say with Lear, that "ripeness is all;" ripeness of understanding of an integrated view of life and what we need to make sense of it. I confess I cannot survive in this world without accommodation.

Tomorrow night Shavuos begins, the time when our tradition understands us to have received the Law. Many years ago, on a Shabbos before Shavuos, I had walked to the Central Park boat house and witnessed a live fish being cast up on the dock, whereupon one of the well-dressed, elegantly styled, "fine, young cannibals" standing about picked the fish up and impaled it on a nail protruding from a timber so that he and his friends could watch it wriggle in its death-throes. In the Talmud we are told: "If not for the Sovereign, men would eat each other alive." In Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dimitri relates how his brother Ivan had said that "if there is no God then everything is permissible." I confess that without the Law, I wouldn't trust myself and I wouldn't trust you.

Perhaps the lingering struggles among fundamentalists today can help us to appreciate the impact that Charles Darwin had on the faith of his contemporaries. More than Copernicus and Galileo in their time did Darwin cause the Victorians to abandon belief in a God who was no longer needed to account for the existence of humans.

Darwin voyaged as the naturalist on the ship Beagle from 1831 to 1836 gathering the specimens and data that would serve as the basis for the detailed essay he wrote in 1844, at the age of 35, on evolution by natural selection which he then proceeded to seal away under the stairs of his home with instructions to his wife to publish the manuscript after his death. He did this largely because he anticipated the reaction which might follow the publication of his theory and he was also concerned about distressing his beloved wife, who was a Wedgwood and a religious woman. The manuscript lay immured for fourteen years until 1858 when Darwin received a letter from Alfred Russel Wallace indicating that he was on the verge of conceiving a similar theory. Darwin expanded his essay into the book we know as *The Origin of Species* and published it within a year.

The final chapter of this work concludes with the following peroration :

"It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent on each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us… Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows. There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one…"

Darwin always denied he was an atheist and always maintained he was an agnostic. We see Darwin himself being of two minds, like Kugel, in this final summary of his great discovery. He is possessed of the massive data provided by research and the insights provided by thought yet he is moved to appropriate the Biblical image of ruach being breathed into Adam as the aboriginal creature.

Some years after the publication of his book, concerned for her husband, Emma wrote to him insisting that "it is feeling and not reasoning that drives one to prayer." Darwin at the end of the letter, never intending it to be seen by anyone else, scribbled in

"God bless you." Darwin is also to be revered as the espouser of another theory, one each person is fated to have to rediscover for themselves. Darwin said to his friend and defender, Joseph Hooker: "Talk of fame, honour, pleasure, wealth, all are dirt compared with affection…" While the capacity for affection is surely conferred by evolution, this insight, and knowing to act on this insight, is not.

Actually, with age I have come to appreciate the limits of what reason alone can provide. As Rav Soleveitchik, the most rational of misnagdim, said in *On Repentance*: "The feeling generated by sin is not a moral sensation; the moral sense in man is not such a powerful force… remorse comes as a result of emotions, not from reasoning; a person's intellect plays a negligible part in it." When the Rav was asked why he violated traditional practice by continuing to say kaddish daily for his beloved wife into the fifth year, he replied, "What can I do?" As Pascal observed: "The heart has its reasons which reason cannot understand." Or as Lord Rochester wrote in his *Satyre Against Reason and Mankind:*

> Then old age and experience, hand in hand,
> Lead him to death, and make him understand,
> After a search so painful and so long,
> That all his life he has been in the wrong,
> Huddled in the dirt the reasoning engine lies,
> Who was proud, so witty, and so wise.

Thomas Hardy was a late Victorian who shared the burden of sorting out the spiritual and cultural disorientation inflicted by Darwin's theory as the Victorian intellectuals withdrew from Christianity. In his poem *God's Funeral,* Hardy imagines observing and then joining a funeral procession in which the vast man-like corpse of God is borne along.

> …
> 'And, tricked by our own early dream
> And need of solace, we grew self-deceived,
> Our making soon our maker did we deem,
> And what we had imagined we believed
> …
>
> 'So, toward our myth's oblivion,
> Darkling, and languid-lipped, we creep and grope
> Sadlier than those who wept in Babylon,
> Whose Zion was still abiding hope.
> …
> Still, how to hear such loss I deemed
> The insistent question for each animate mind,
> And gazing, to my growing sight there seemed
> A pale yet positive gleam low down behind,
>
> Whereof, to lift the general night,
> A certain few who stood aloof had said,
> 'See you upon the horizon that small light-
> Swelling somewhat?' Each mourner shook his head.

And they composed a crowd of whom
Some were right good, and many nigh the best…
Thus dazed and puzzled 'twixt the gleam and gloom
Mechanically I followed with the rest.

I shall choose to shake off the daze, live with the puzzle and pursue the faint gleam and not surrender to the gloom. As marvelous and rich as it is, the magnificent edifice of Judaism as civilization alone is not enough without the possibility of God hovering in the background. Science does not address meaning and purpose. These are not scientific questions. Primo Levi wrote in *Survival in Auschwitz*: "The conviction that life has a purpose is rooted in every fiber of [humans], it is a property of the human substance." It is not that questions about God's presence in the world should cause us to cease uttering the words of prayer but rather they should goad us to make the words more meaningful and more true to ourselves. …or, perhaps, ourselves more true to the words. The literary critic Alfred Kazin, deriving from a secular, Socialist background, concluded the final installment of his autobiography, *New York Jew,* by writing: "I want to love again. I want my God back. I will never give up until it is too late to expect you."

You know, I had considered inventing a word composed of Greek roots meaning "one who struggles with the idea of God" for this dvar Torah, but then I realized such a term already exists, in Hebrew- Yisrael.

Howard L. Berkowitz
June 7, 2008

**Dvar torah for *Naso* (June 4, 2011)**
**Bethamie Horowitz**

Months ago, when I volunteered to give the *dvar torah* on June 4th I had no idea that it would turn out to be the minyan's annual graduation Shabbat. [I will say that I offered to give up my spot if a graduate wanted to take this on, but there were no takers]

My original motivation was to use the occasion to mark my father's 10th yahrzeit this week, and next month the 31st anniversary of my mother's death. Their deaths (particularly my mother's) no longer seem so astonishing to me, as I've reached an age where nearly all of my peers have become members of the club.

I realize this is perhaps a somber note to sound on a Shabbat marking so many graduations, but the thing is, all major transitions involve some coming to terms with **how to *carry on***. I use the term in its multiple meanings.

After loss, carrying on is about figuring out how to proceed, emotionally. But there is another kind of carrying on that is related to graduating from one stage to the next: what exactly do carry on with you as you move ahead?

It's the sorting process that you face: What you keep and what do you give away or throw out? What do you take along with you in your life going forward, and what do put in storage? (And as a parent myself, I'll add, and who keeps all of the stuff in trust for the offspring?)

I would say the same thing on the occasion of graduation, but with a different pitch or tone. You've gotten to this point, and now, you're heading off to the next stage. You have a chance to clean house. What will you keep of all of the stuff you've accumulated? What's worthwhile? What will hold you in good stead? What is just clutter?

Now it happens that these themes are apparent both in today's parshah and in the confluence of holidays and events that come together in the calendar.

**Calendar**

Let's consider that this year the minyan's "Graduation Shabbat" falls in between two holidays on the Jewish calendar-- *Yom Yerushalayim* last week and *Shavuot coming up this week.* This confluence of events and holidays is worth parsing.

Already today it's apparent that *Yom Yerushalayim* is not on the major hit parade in our yearly holiday cycle while *Shavuot* is of course one of the three Festivals. I suspect that we'll be carrying on *Shavuot* long into the future, while I'm not convinced that *Yom Yerushalayim* will have the same longevity.

The question is, why>?

I think it has to do with the fact that *Shavuot* is *old* and but in some ways *new*, it's *borrowed* in some ways and it's not limited to *blue* (and white).

Let me explain.

1. Old and New:

*Shavuot* is a very old holiday, described in the bible, with even older agricultural origins, while *Yom Yerushalayim* is much newer. It's only 44 years old, one of four holidays (*Yom ha Shoah, Yom ha Zikaron, Yom ha atzmaut)* added to the Jewish calendar in the 20th century-- since the founding of the state of Israel, -- It marks an actual event in recent history.

The ancientness of *Shavuot* makes it much more open to reinvention, as it's origins are multiple and therefore rich, perhaps it has the aura of something more.

It is new insofar as it has been reinvented. There have been innovations around how to celebrate.

> *Shavuot's* biblical underpinnings include both the agricultural aspect of harvests and first fruits, and the one of the *shalosh regalim.* Festivals of ascending to Jerusalem, to the Temple.
>
> There's the historical /theological layering of Deliverance from Slavery to redemption and receiving the Torah at Sinai – but the Creation- Redemption-Revelation layer didn't develop until later.

All of this richness at the roots has made Shavuot a holiday ripe for religious innovation, in fact crying out for it.
I say this because among the three *regalim*, compared to *Pesach* and *Sukkot*. *Shavuot* is the least elaborated and defined

- In contrast to the other festivals it's only a day or two long, as compared to seven or eight.
- Unlike the other holidays, it has *no unique mitzvoth to be fulfilled.* On *Sukkoth* we dwell in the *sukkah*. On *Pesach* we eat *matzah. (Pesach* tells us what to eat; *Sukkot* defines where we eat)
- But what are we required to do on *Shavuot*? We know there's plenty of tradition around *Shavuot*, like eating dairy and having a *Tikkun leyl Shavuot*, but these aren't *mitzvoth* per se.

From a parental point of view, you might say that for a long time the holiday was underperforming, not living up to its potential. But then people started to take things into their own hands and to play around with the holiday and the shape it might take.

*With its lack of halachic specificity Shavuot has lent itself to a great deal of innovation over the generations*

2. Borrowed

*Shavuot* reinvention has involved *something borrowed* in the sense of taking its themes from other existing frames or stores of meaning. And there have been borrowings and incorporations from other times and places, changing contexts.

- The *Tikkun layl Shavuot* was invented by the kabbalists, and it gained in popularity after coffee was discovered and people could stay up all night.

- In our own time *Shavuot Tikkun* was reinvigorated by the *Havurah* in the form of the all-night *Tikkun.*

- Ruth Calderon applied this idea to her work with secular Israelis at Alma, and now it's been reimported and taken off in at the JCC

- [In the Reform movement *Shavuot* was reinvented as a time of confirmation for HS sophomores (16 years old), on cusp of adulthood…coinciding with the invention of "adolescence" in the 20th century.]

3. Something Blue (and White)

In contrast to *Shavuot*, we have Yom Yerushalayim: which is new, not borrowed, and quite blue (and white)—i.e. based in recent Israeli history.

The religious Zionist world certainly celebrates *Yom Yerushalayim* with a *hallel.* But how else do we relate to it? In the early years after 1967 we sang *Yerushalayim shel Zahav*. But in those days we sang that nearly all of the time then! [Now, it seems very passé or at least very nostalgic. It's become a golden oldie that is no longer fresh and exciting. You might call it a kind of "war horse" which itself is a kind of interesting term in this case,] *Yom Yerushalayim* is so literal – marking an actual event in history. It doesn't leave much to the imagination, and I think that's part of its problem, which you think about its ability to endure over the course of history.

All in all, my sense is that Shavuot will have a much longer shelf life than *Yom Yerushalayim*. Due to the ways these two holidays differ in terms of old and new and their ability to borrow and innovate.

And the blue or at least blue and white aspect matters, too. Because Shavuot is not limited to its Blue and White aspects —the national dimension-- with its competing ideological readings is a tougher sell across the whole of the Jewish people. In contrast, *Shavuot*, with its many layers and colorations, can accommodate more diversity. There's greater room for tailoring the practices and more space for different kinds of personal meaning in Shavuot than in *Yom Yerushalayim*.

It has to do with the open space within the set up of the holiday that leaves space for individual expression.

**Finally, we can see these same themes in today's *parshah*.** The question of the shelf life of old practices: what gets carried o and what gets discarded. [And note that *Naso* is itself a word that is about carrying/bringing forward.]

*Naso* has three main sections: *Sotah,* Nazirite and Blessing

So we've altogether discarded the archaic practices of *Sotah* and *Nazerite*. The priestly blessing, though, plays out differently. With the destruction of the second Temple, the status of Temple, priests and sacrificial offerings changed– They were no longer tied to a specific place, but became part of a moveable feast. Namely, the blessing offered by Kohanim and their descendants when they *duchan* in *shul*. In *shul,* rather than in the Temple. And even to the point where parents bless their children in their own homes.

Finally, there is a message in the very imagery contained in the Priestly Blessing, about *God's face shining on us*,

Note, it's not an idea of God as a scary burning bush or as something too searing or dangerous to encounter. Rather, the image is warm, gracious, accepting, and loving, beaming. A good image for parents.

So, fellow parents, we've blessed our children through our actions by raising them to this point and laying the foundations.

As they continue to step up and out, the trick will be for us to give them space to flourish in their own terms, and to allow them to take on the sorting process. They'll carry on some things and discard others, and hopefully continue to innovate and tailor the most meaningful pieces to suit their lives in their own terms.

Parashat Naso

June 11, 2022: Shortly before the Supreme Court ruling that overturned Roe v. Wade

Shabbat shalom—or gut Shabbos, as the case may be.

As I'm sure many of you know, the ancient rabbis proposed that the fourth section of the Torah is in effect a combination of two books. The one we began reading last week they called Sefer HaPikudim—or, as an imaginative English-speaker might say, the Book of Numbers. In Sefer HaPikudim, everything is counted, and counted again, and listed, and ordered, to the point that I once began to wonder if maybe God is a little OCD. The other text, which we'll get to soon, was known to the rabbis as Sefer Bamidbar—or, as an imaginative English-speaker might say, The Book of Where the hell are we, and how do we get out? This book has a violent rebellion or maybe two (it's hard to tell), plagues, giants, fiery serpents, extraordinary geological anomalies, and a talking donkey. In this book of the wilderness, everything is chaotic and uncanny.

Now, Naso is where a bit of that weirdness and chaos begins to leak into the pure order of Sefer Ha-Pikudim. I would not go so far as to call this a moment of transition. At the end of Naso, we're still preoccupied with counting and ordering. But the prevailing order is disturbed here for the first time, in a significant way: by a ritual of magical divination—already, we're in weird territory—concerning the *sotah*: a wife who is suspected by her husband of having been sexually unfaithful.

I have no need to stress how ppropriate it is, right now, for us to be reading about the law of the *sotah,* or rather the creepy ordeal of the *sotah,* when we're waiting for the Supreme Court to rule that the Constitution grants women no autonomy over their own bodies.

However, I assume that the law of the *sotah,* like everything else in the Torah, is of interest even when Samuel Alito and his gang are *not* on the bench. So today I'm going to focus on the aspect of the law of the *sotah* that foreshadows the disorder and craziness to come in Sefer Bamidbar. This aspect is

doubt. The sotah is subjected to trial by ordeal because the husband has no *proof* of infidelity. He is wildly wrought up, but perhaps that's not only because he is jealous, but also because *it drives him crazy not to know.*

Doubt is an immensely disruptive force. To understand just how disruptive, all you have to do is see the lengths to which the text goes to conceal the fact that doubt has been introduced.

Here's the JPS translation:

> If any man's wife has gone astray and broken faith with him, in that a man has had carnal relations with her unbeknown to her husband, and she keeps secret the fact that she has defiled herself without being forced, and there is no witness against her—but a fit of jealousy comes over him and he is wrought up about the wife who has defiled herself; or if a fit of jealousy comes over one and he is wrought up about his wife although she has not defiled herself...

Three whole p'suklm go by—a total of 40 words in Hebrew—before the text adds a case in which the wife *has done nothing wrong.* This possibility is tucked in almost surreptitiously, as a parenthetical phrase. First you get an agglomeration of guilt—gone astray, broken faith, had carnal relations, defiled herself. Then there's a little peep about innocence before the sentence rolls on, ending with the command to haul the woman before the priest.

Simply on a grammatical level, the text disguises the presence of doubt, in the midst of acknowledging that doubt exists. Look beyond the Torah to the Gemara, and you find that this one disguise has multiplied into a carnival of denial.

To point out only a few highlights of the parade: The Torah says "there is no witness against her," but the Gemara asserts that "witness" really means *two* witnesses, so let's assume that *one* man came forward to accuse her. And what if that one man were the husband himself? The Torah says the wife acted in secret, without her husband's knowing. But let's say he knew she'd had the *opportunity* to sleep with another man, and he'd warned her to stay away, but she hadn't. So he can testify about a sin of which he's ignorant.

The doubt is disguised further when the rabbis luxuriate in the insults and humiliations the accused woman is made to endure *before* she drinks the ritual potion. In the immortal words of Reb Lewis Carroll, "First the verdict, *then* the trial." And in the boldest move of all, some of the rabbis speculate that the ritual potion, the so-called *mei ha-marim*, or water of bitterness, did not become bitter by a miracle as it entered the accused woman's body. Rather, the priest who administered the potion added something that *made* it bitter. Did this extra ingredient also ensure that the spell would take effect, making the woman's thigh sag and her belly distend? We're surely not meant to think so. As Ramban writes, the law of the sotah is the only ordinance in the Torah that depends on a miracle. And yet, as soon as you read that the priest might have put something bitter into the mei ha-marim, a new doubt may occur: maybe the result did not depend *entirely* on a miracle.

Now, I've been describing the ordeal as a vengeful assault on a woman's body: a woman who might be guiltless, though everything will be done to negate that possibility. However, some current scholarship sees the ritual differently. By Googling around on thetorah.com, I learned that Hannah Liss thinks the law of the sotah was not so much an ordeal for punishing sexual infidelity as a means for assuaging a husband's jealousy and permitting him to keep living with a woman whom he doubted. In this view, it's a ritual of marital reconciliation. And Jacob Milgrom, in the JPS Torah Commentary, emphasizes that the word "adultery" is never used in the law of the sotah. Milgrom sees the ordeal as a way to *avoid* charging a woman with this capital crime. He goes on to note that Yochanan ben Zakkai eventually ruled, presumably as a leniency, that the ritual should be discontinued.

I have no standing to question these scholars. But I looked up the passage in the Mishnah in which Yochanan ben Zakkai canceled the ritual, so I could understand the context, and I found that this seems like a bad thing, not a good one. The ritual is abandoned because there are now so many adulterers that it would be impossible to discipline them all. For the same reason, the rabbis abandoned

the ritual of breaking a heifer's neck to clear the bloodguilt of an unsolved murder. Murders are now so common, the Mishnah says, that it's no use going through the ritual.

A murder victim has been found, and nobody can identify the killer. A woman is suspected of having committed adultery, and nobody can be sure if she did. This very gloomy section of the Mishnah, on the theme of the whole world's falling apart, begins with two cases in which doubt will no longer be allayed.

Which leads me out of Sefer Ha-Pikudim and into the wilderness of Sefer Bamidbar, where everything seems to be in doubt, all the time. It's so chaotic, so uncertain, that you might almost imagine that a mixed multitude of slaves had escaped from Egypt and wound up wandering in the desert for years, simply because they didn't know where they were going and couldn't agree on a direction.

This is the ultimate doubt: the suspicion that there really was no strong hand and outstretched arm for the Israelites in the desert, and no guiding hand of Providence for us. From the point of view of Torah, this is the doubt above all others that must be suppressed.

Which brings me to the question I've been leading up to. How does the law of the sotah, with its denial of doubt, connect with the even greater doubts to come, amid the chaos of wandering? Is there a link?

I believe there is, in the medium of the ordeal: water, which is a scarce and precious resource in the desert. Doubt is removed, one way or the other, when the accused woman drinks the water of bitterness, *mei ha-marim*.

Now look ahead to parashat Chukat, in which the Israelites cry out for lack of water. This is the moment when Moshe commits his unpardonable sin by striking the rock with his staff, after flying into a rage and screaming at the assembled people, "Listen, you rebels!" *Shimu-na ha-morim*. The waters of bitterness: *mei ha-marim*. The so-called rebels demanding water: *ha-morim*.

Are they guilty as charged? To me, it seems an unjust allegation. They're just frightened people, dying of thirst. If anyone is a rebel at this moment, it's Moshe, who lashes out against God's command and, in a very familiar dynamic, accuses other people of his own fault.

Here is one link with the sotah. According to the rabbis, if a husband had committed adultery himself, he was not permitted to accuse his wife and make her undergo the ritual.

Here's a second link. The Israelites are saved by a sudden abundance of clean water. But this rescue does not follow the plan that God has laid out. It's unexpected, almost random—more of a wonder than a miracle. As for the sotah, she has to drink water that's been befouled, which then acts upon her miraculously. Or not so miraculously, if you're curious about what the priest dropped into it.

What does it teach us, this echo across Sefer Ha-Pikudim and Sefer Bamidbar of water and water, *marim* and *morim*? What can we learn about the doubts we might sometimes not be able to suppress, and about the hand of Providence we might long for?

Maybe the lesson is that a man who is driven crazy by doubt about his wife, and who relies on a miracle to settle his mind, sometimes gets nothing better than priestly sleight of hand and the waste of precious water; while sometimes—certainly not always, maybe not often, but sometimes—desperate, frightened people who have given up hope are flooded with salvation, out of nowhere, if not as a miracle then as a wonder.

The rabbis said, Sefer Ha-Pikudim is an ideal, and Sefer Bamidbar, despite its craziness, is real. I say, score another one for the rabbis.

Shabbat shalom.

Adina Gerwin drash M'at graduation Shabbat JUNE 3

Good Shabbos!

This week's parsha, Parshat *Nasso*, is part of *Sefer Bamdibar*, the "Book of the Desert". It was only giving this drash that I also learned that *Sefer Bamdibar* is known in English as the Book of Numbers! While that surprised me it turns out that there are quite a few numbers in this book including a census from last week, today, and even another one coming up in another *parsha*. While a census and numbers might sound pretty boring for a graduation shabbat, at least its not *TAZRIA METSORA*!

No, actually, a census is taking count at a specific moment. It's taking stock of a moment in time, in this case the *Levieem* who are able to work in the *Mishcan*. And that is a pretty meaningful analogy to a graduation moment when you take stock of where you are now after a particular education and set number of years of schooling. I can look back across 12 years of Jewish Day School. Kind of like the years in the desert, they include plagues, flight from the city, years abroad, and even some sedentary moments.

We can also look back from our *Parsha* to an earlier census taken the year after we left Egypt. As expected, after the Exodus there were a lot of Conservative Jews but over a span of 38 years the Orthodox population grew while the Conservative movement is now mostly alive within the 65+ communities. Oh wait! That is just the 2020 Pew Research report.

What is interesting with Bamidbar is that in the desert the population of the tribe of Shimon decreased. What started as a tribe of 59,300 decreased to a tribe of only 22,200.

37,100 people just gone!

If you just simply glance at census numbers you see the gap.

You see the missing people.

And yet you have no clue why it happened. The census gives you a question, but it doesn't tell you the story.

Well, with a little help from *Chazal*, I'm going to tell you a story.

As most stories in the Torah do, this one involves a good dose of idolatry and also what today we call intermarriage. The Israelites have arrived in *Shitim* and the men are sleeping with the Moabite women and worshiping *Baal Peor*.

One day Zimri, who coincidentally is from the tribe of Shimon, and the Midianite Princess, Cozbi, decide to have sex in front of the *Mishcan*. Phinchas, being the good old grandson of Aaron, spears them right through the belly! Naturally, this makes God very happy.

The very last line of this story is:

וַתֵּעָצַר֙ הַמַּגֵּפָ֔ה מֵעַ֖ל בְּנֵ֥י יִשְׂרָאֵֽל׃: and the plague stopped!

What! There has been a plague the whole time!

Seriously?

And then we learn that twenty-four thousand people died from that plague.

This is followed by the census that tells us there are only 22,200 numbers of Shevet Shimon remaining. So a reduction of 37,100 (from the original census numbers the year after leaving Egypt).

*Chazal* teaches us that it was not only Zimri who participated in sin. Rather, many other members of *Shevet Shimon* were committing idolatry and having a grand old time with the *Moabite* women.

You do the math.

Number of people killed in plague: 24,000
38 years decrease in tribal membership: 37,100

*Chazal* think that the plague accounts for ⅔ of that 37,100 person drop [in the population of the tribe of Shimon]. That makes a lot of sense!

But what about that remaining ⅓? How did they die? And why weren't there more children? If you just look at that one moment of the census and going back to Naso and the census of the *Levieem* you don't have any of the background.

You have no idea why they might have lost so many people. Was it fertility problems? Did the earth start swallowing more people and nobody bothered to record it?

WE HAVE NO IDEA!

Because a census is just a number and a moment and not a real reason why.

The haftarah is also a moment. It is here because we read about the *Nazir* in our parsha. But I'm going to talk about the way the haftarah relates to time. In this case, there is a very dramatic birth announcement. But unlike the census, this comes with a story.

There is this women מָנוֹחַ אִשְׁתּוֹ who is very infertile and has no children. And then, suddenly, an Angel of God appears ONLY to her, not to her husband, proclaiming that she is going to conceive and have a son. And by the way, she can't drink any booze or eat anything impure and after he is born she cannot cut his hair. Because, like every other graduate we are celebrating today, he will grow up to save the Jewish people!

In a dramatic moment at the end of this announcement the angel is invited for dinner, a sacrifice is made and instead of staying to eat the angel of GOD ascends back to heaven in the flames of the altar.

וַיַּעַל מַלְאַךְ־יְהוָה בְּלַהַב הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וּמָנוֹחַ וְאִשְׁתּוֹ רֹאִים וַיִּפְּלוּ עַל־פְּנֵיהֶם אָרְצָה׃

It is this insanely beautiful image.

But if you just zoom in and only focus on this one grand moment you miss everything around it. You have no idea that מָנוֹחַ אִשְׁתּוֹ was infertile before. Or, more importantly, you do not think about Samson's life and what it will actually mean for him to be a Nazir .

Ultimately, what we see here is a parent setting their kid on path. מָנוֹחַ וְאִשְׁתּוֹ is choosing now to not do certain things: to not drink or eat *tuma* , to not cut her son's hair because she is setting him up to be the savior. But the truth is that Shimshon is going to have to live his own life and that what our parents wish for us or the path that they send us on is not always going to be the one we choose. Even if it's not just our parents or our grandparents but it's actually God telling us we must do this, the path directed might not be the one we take. *Shimshon* is on the Nazir path until he isn't.

For me graduating from high school is another moment in time. It's somewhere between the grandeur of this birth announcement and the quotidian nature of a census. As I reach this point, I think back to what was before and what is yet to be.

What I am thinking about are not the milestones but rather all the unexpected little moments that make up a life. My bat-mitzvah was great, but I think about all of the times I have leyned since. Or all the *gabi shenis* who helped me when the troup flew out of my head. (Don't worry - the Hebrew always was fine!!) I know I'm giving a graduation drash but I remember all the random ordinary *shabboses* when I showed up and someone's drash blew me out of the water. Or there was the time when I went abroad and suddenly 6 weeks into a German homestay year we are on vacation in Sweden and I am able to have shabbat dinner with a person from my minyan back home. Who also happens to also be the Chief Rabbi! (Shout out to UTE!) I know I am graduating high-school and that's very real and exciting, it's even possible that I have been counting down the days, but what I am truly most looking forward to are the things that I can't prepare for.

I will just end with one final thought.

Two summers ago, I studied *Masechet Makot* at the Drisha summer program. Begining on *daf kaf-gimel, amud bet*, appear the main statements about the number of mitvot. Rabbi Simlai establishes the six hundred and thirteen mitzvot with this idea about the 365 prohibitions and then all the positive mitzvot. Then Rabbi Hanna teaches us that we get 611 from the gematria of the word Torah, whose numeric value is 611, and those were commandments received from Moses, but then we add two more because God said an extra two directly to us. So, we almost had 611 mitzvot but it's really 613 mitzvot.

Anyway, the point is that this fairly obscure and off-handed conversation has given rise to centuries of commentary about what is actually a mitzvah that we count. Here we are attempting to live this Jewish life with instructions that are just not very clear. Even thinking to the Ten Commandments, we can all agree on the number ten, but the way we define what actually are the ten commandments themselves differs. Where language declares one ending vs another is disputed and unclear.

Ultimately, we have these numbers, 613 *mitzvot*, 10 commandments, and they are supposed to provide us with our clearest direction for divide guidance in life. Yet, we cannot actually agree on how to count them, and many of the commandments revolve around the Temple so even if we could agree on how to count them, we cannot carry them out.

Nursery, Kindergarten, 12 years of schooling. And yet what takes place during each of those individual days isn't so obvious. You know, there might end up being a few years in Israel and Germany, or even a global pandemic.

Do I know that I am planning on a Yeshiba gap year followed by 4 years of college? Yes. There are 613 mitzvot.

Do I have any real idea what to expect? Not so much.

What I am most looking forward to are not the milestone moments but the stories, the unexpected, and just all the things that you cannot prepare for, but that, together, are the meaning that makes a life.

Yona



In what I would call the quintessential high school movie, *Say Anything*, starring John Cusack and Ione Skye (with appearances by numerous Cusack film regulars, including John's sister Joan, and Lili Taylor), John's character, Lloyd Dobbler, graduates from high school. Diane Court, ably played by Ione (Ion…? Whatever, I am never sure how to pronounce her name) is both the love of Lloyd's life and the valedictorian of her graduating class. In her speech, her valedictory speech, she says at one point, speaking of the many advanced courses she took not in her high school but in a local college, "I have glimpsed our future, and all I can say is, go back…" Since I will not be making the valedictory speech at my high school on June 20th – in fact there is no valedictorian (though if there was, in all likelihood, I still would not be making any speeches) – I have decided to turn this *drash* into what my valedictory speech might be, replete with *Say Anything* references, corny sentiments, and, since I do attend Ramaz, even the necessary allusions to Beha'alotecha, this weeks *parsha*. Sort of, at least.

So, where shall I begin? The last time I did this was at my *bat mitzvah*, and I promised myself I would give a *drash* on my *parsha*, Noach, again the next year… A different one – one about animal rights and that sort of thing, how it relates to Judaism and particularly the Seven Laws of the Children of Noah, but I didn't, so I am freshly intimidated by this. It has been 5 and a half years. How do I fill up a whole speech? Thankfully, my friends were eager to pitch in with ideas, and so, I will start with this.

Throughout the *Torah*, God is a parent figure, a fairly traditional one. Still, God's relationships with Avraham, Isaac, Jacob, the afore-mentioned Noah, and even with Moses, are all different, but they are all more mentorships than father-son roles. Certainly there are moments when the mortal men argue with God like a child with his



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father – Avraham haggling over the destruction of Sodom, Moses over the task of leading *bnei Yisrael*, and later over the possible killing of them. These are not friendships between two equals. Still, these are all men who are entrusted by God with special tasks. They are singled out because of their skills, and they are appreciated because of these. God's love for them is in some ways not unconditional – they are special because they are the best men of their generation, because they are indeed special. In the desert, with an unruly nation, God's love is different.

"Va-yehi ha'am ke-meetonenim ra be-oznei hashem va-yoshma hashem va-yechar apo va-tiv-air bam eish hashem va-tochal bi-ktseh ha-machaneh." "And the people were as murmerers, speaking evil in the ears of the Lord; and when the Lord heard it, His anger was kindled: and the fire of the Lord burnt among them, and devoured in the uttermost part of the camp." Beha'alotecha, *Perek Yud Aleph, Pasuk Aleph.* Here, God, angry at a disobedient nation, sets fire to most of the camp, killing people and lowering morale and trust. And so we read this and we say, this is how our God acts. He is a scary God.

Then, Moses prays for the people, and God relents, and the fire dies, and all is good until the people being complaining again, one *pasuk* later, because they don't have meat – or fish or leeks or cucumbers. At least my translation says cucumbers – though I am sure in seventh grade we learned zucchini, because I will never forget how strange I found it that these people were wandering around in the desert when they suddenly realized they had a hankering for, of all things, zucchini. I thought then, wow, who knew? I still sort of wonder this. But, whatever, now the nation wants cucumbers, zucchini, it doesn't matter which… And Moses loses it, and we prepare to have God burn

down the rest of the people when we read that he too is angry, but he does not send fire. Instead he parcels off power to seventy prophets. But then, two more would be prophets begin prophesying in the camp, amidst the people. And then quail come – God himself sends the quail, and the nation eats in excess. Only then, does God smote his disobedient nation.

Once I heard a teacher say "God is a jealous, zealous God." This was a translation of something, and I never quite believed it to be a truthful one. I have always hated it and loved it at the same time. Hated it because it makes God sound mean and scary, as he seems in the story related above, – because jealousy is wrong, and zealotry is not always right, clearly. But I loved it, and still love it, because it explained away the bad things that God continually did. He became perfect in a primitive sense – perfect in the way he cared, and perfect in his deeds, because they were done out of zealotry for humanity, I guess. Still, one never really smotes ones children, does one? At least, one doesn't if one is a relatively good, kind, compassionate, modern and sane parent.

Here is another once… Once someone gave a *drash* on Jacob and Esau. It was a series of parables, and though I forget who gave it, if you are here, I want to say it was one of the most personally meaningful d'var torahs I have heard, and so I want to steal a line from you. Here is a parable. God is the father of a teenage son, or a teenage daughter. I will say son, because this way I can disassociate this parable from my own personal family, since my sister and I are both girls. Still, of course it is about us, too. It is supposed to be universal. So, anyway, B'nei Yisrael will be the son – not sons, but one son.

One day the father comes home and sees his son doing something bad, something that his son knows he is not supposed to do, but still, something he is doing anyway. What is this bad thing? It depends on the father and the son. Perhaps the son is taunting his brother, perhaps he is smoking an illegal substance. What is important is that the father loses himself in fear and anger. What have I raised? He thinks for a moment, and before he knows it he has slapped his son, not abusively, not even painfully, but still, he has slapped him all the same. And his son is furious, and scared, because his father is not the type to hit him at all, in fact, he has never hit him before, and the father is furious too, furious at himself for losing both control and his son's trust, and he vows never to hit him again. Still, at the same time, he ~~feels~~ believes firmly limits must be set.

A short time passes and the father catches the son doing the bad thing again, or another bad, or perhaps ungrateful thing. This time he tries to control his anger – no phone privileges he says, or, more aptly for the parable, he enlists his parents, and his wife for help. He tries to make things easier for his son, to help him solve whatever ails him. Yet, the father catches the son still doing this thing, or another bad thing, and he is furious again and suddenly his hand slips out again, and he strikes his son again, out of a zealous, painful, fierce, fierce love. My own mother has told me on occasion that she believes that teenagers act up so often, and parents are so easily angered, because they are both unprepared to separate. By the time children go off both they and their parents are ready to escape what has become an impossible environment. Of course parents are always parents, but there is childhood, a time of coddling – when pain is sometimes inflicted by the outside world, but home is a haven – and there is adulthood, when parents are not perfunctory, but are present more in little ways than in large ones. Than there is

adolescence and separation, and this is what the desert is for God, and for *bnei yisrael*, a period of adolescence, when they are pushed close together, and yet cannot get along at all. And though they fight, and get upset, and even cause each other pain, in the end we all know it will work out.

And so I have made it seem like adolescence is a bad time, a time to be escaped, a time all are happy to leave behind. This is in many ways true. Often growing up is awful. Personally, in many ways, growing up was awful. In three days I will turn 18, officially an adult in most ways in this country, and yet still there are so many aspects of the past four years which I haven't quite gotten over – which I may never get over. On erev Yom Kippur in 9th grade I got an awful haircut – hopefully most of you don't remember it. Ever since I have become superstitious – never again will I get my hair cut on a day when all of my sins for an entire year have yet to be absolved. Perhaps this is not a Jewish way to look at things, but I believe in haircut karma. That cut, I feel, ruined my year. Yes, I'll admit, perhaps it didn't ruin it single-handedly – I was shy too, and even I'll admit my taste in clothes was lacking (fine, at times non-existant, even), but still. This year, I will get my haircut on my birthday. When my salon called to reschedule the cut (and trust me, it is a better salon than the horrific one which I still curse when I pass by) from the 6th to the 12th I took it as a sign that luck would be on my side. Still, I will wince when Mili first touches those silver shears to my tresses, for though I trust her, I have never gotten over that, that, that abomination which rested on my head for 6 months in 1997-1998. It will never leave me. It was horrific.

Still, I quoted Diane Court for a reason, and not just because I feel the need to quote *Say Anything*, and a few other favorite films, whenever possible. Well, yes, I did

quote her because of that, but I really feel the quote is applicable. "Ve achar nasoo ha'am me-chatzeirot ve-ya-chanoo be-midbar Paran." In English this is "And afterward the people journeyed from Hazeroth, and pitched in the wilderness of Paran." And that is how the Parsha ends. If Beha'alotecha was the only *parsha* in the Torah this could be applicable because *bnei* journeyed (and isn't life all a journey? I mean, next year I will be journeying to Israel, the year after to Philadelphia – and my sister, journeying perhaps even farther, to the wilds of Flatbush...) There is more, though, something that relates exactly to what Diane Court says. In Paran men are sent out to scout Canaan, and when they return, most of them recommending that the nation not enter, God forces them to "go back." To continue their period of adolescence – to extend it – because the nation just isn't ready. *Bnei Yisrael* is furious, just as Diane would probably have been if she really did have to go back to high school, and wasn't able to run off with Lloyd to an extremely prestigious fellowship at one of England's finest schools (the lucky girl...) For don't we all feel that we could get more out of adolescence? Like we aren't ready to leave. I know that with four more years of high school – eight, ten, twelve – I would do different things, go different places. In 9th grade, with a helmet for hair, and awful, awful clothes (I had a forest green skirt with bridles on it, horse bridles, for goodness sake) who knew I would feel nostalgia for high school, ever. Who knew that I would feel so, so unready to leave. In 9th grade, 10th grade, maybe even part of 11th grade, I felt so ready for college I could almost burst. I knew I was a college person. Now I am much less sure. I was so much older, then, I guess. I'm younger than that now.

My favorite line in *Say Anything* is not Diane Court's line. Actually, I don't really like that line that much. Nobody does – the whole thing in the graduation scene is

that everyone was supposed to laugh at that line, it was the humorous moment in her speech, and only her father laughs… well, her father and Lloyd. No, my favorite line is one of Lloyd's. At one point he says "I don't want to sell anything, buy anything, or process anything as a career. I don't want to sell anything bought or processed, or buy anything sold or processed, or process anything sold, bought, or processed, or repair anything sold, bought, or processed. You know, as a career, I don't want to do that." At that moment I understand Lloyd so, so well. What do I like to do? I like to read, watch TV, movies, write I guess, hang out with friends… I have no interest in worrying about money all my life, or about things, so I have resigned myself to either being really rich or really poor (preferably really poor during my bohemian period, after graduate school, abroad in some European country, and then really rich at a point after that). What do I want to do? I have no idea. Absolutely no idea.

I am sure if someone told me today to turn around I wouldn't be happy, but still, in a real way I do envy B'nei Yisrael, for the chance to extend the limbo that is adolescence a bit longer, a chance to wander more. A chance to have really found themselves by the time they are supposed to have done so. And I guess in the American liberal arts system I have this in a way. I too have been given an opportunity most people don't get – and even though, yes, I am tired of school, and pressure, and all of that awful stuff which was such a large part of my high school career, and will probably (hopefully, assuming I don't become the true slacker I know I so easily could be, instead of the semi-slacker I push myself so hard to be) be a part of my college career as well. So, I sort of get to go back too. On the 20th I will not attend my graduation, just as I will not be a Valedictorian – I will attend my commencement, meaning beginning, not end. So yeah,

I'll admit it. I am far from grown up. I still believe in haircut karma – I can barely wrap presents – I have no idea how to use a Dictaphone. Truthfully, there are moments at night when I'll be staying at a friends house and I will suddenly know, deep in my heart know, that they have become monsters, vampires, in the dark. Really, there are numerous people here who can attest to that. Perhaps this is because America coddles its youth, the American Upper Middle Class coddles its youth, today's world coddles its youth. Perhaps I will never grow up. But perhaps not. Perhaps, just like Am Yisrael got an extra 38 years, I too can have much, much more time. Even Lloyd can frolic in England with Diane Court and can still end up a record store owner in Chicago by age 35 or so in *High Fidelity* (because we all know that John Cusack really plays the same guy, at different life stages, except maybe in *Being John Malkovitch*, *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, and a couple of Woody Allen films). And maybe even in *High Fidelity* he isn't grown up. But by then he sure is trying. That is about it, really. It was a lot easier than I thought to make this *drash* a theme – to empathize with *bnei Yisrael*. I barely had to stretch at all, most of the time. And on a side note, my graduation's theme this year will be Say Anything, in no small part thanks to me. Unfortunately, nobody liked the idea of having my grade go up to our contata directly quoting *Say Anything* and wearing John Cusack masks (pretensions and tradition got in the way). At least I had this opportunity to spread some of Cameron Crowe's *Say Anything* wisdom.

Like my Bat Mitzvah *drash* I want to end this with thank you's – here is where extreme corniness comes in (though unlike at my bat mitzvah I will not speak about how Yona means dove, and I will not thank my parents and my community for giving me wings to soar… I'm a New York teenager – a bit too jaded for that). Still, though I will

be around this summer (yes – I am available to babysit, and actually, I don't have a fulltime job yet, so even though I shouldn't be saying this on Shabbos, if anyone knows of anything…) I will take this opportunity to thank everyone now. First of all my parents – first is definitely not least, but I just want to get you out of the way, since this is a communal thank you more than a personal one (that goes for the incredible Merav too). And then – everyone else in the minyan. Most all of you have known me for a long time, and none of you stopped talking to me when I had that haircut in 9th grade – even though you weren't bound by law to love me unconditionally. I have been to your houses, eaten your food, watched your kids, hung out with your kids. I have grown up with some of you – some of you are my closest friends in the world (and of course, by extension, the coolest people in the world). Really, I thank and salute you. I have traveled the world, near and far… Whatever – I have been to New Zealand, and a bunch of other fairly interesting places, and I have never seen a community that approaches this one – even on my sojourns to the Upper East Side… You – both the personal yous out there, and you as a collective group, and we even (myself included) are amazing and exceptional as a whole. I thank you all for watching over me during the latter part of my childhood and my adolescence, and for making me feel at this moment like I was raised here, even if I did spend my first nine years or so on different floors. That means so much, and it will make this end just that much harder, and yet still, knowing you all will still be here, just that much easier. Thank you, and Good Shabbos.

**Beha'alotkha**

Shabbat shalom—or gut Shabbos, as the case may be.

When a parshah begins with a commandment about the menorah, the least a darshan should offer is illumination. And that's what I hope to give you—something enlightening, and inspiring, and maybe even inspiriting—about two months from now. I've got a parshah all picked out, and I've been making notes.

But today, you've got a short-order drash. Sorry about that. Bonnie put out the call, and I responded, and as a result you're going to get, more or less, a free association, based on whatever I was already thinking about. Which means I'm going to talk about how, for a long time now, I've been worried about the Levites.

Frankly, I'm also worried about God. I don't want to use terms like "sinister," but to a mere human like me, who springs up like the grass and withers, some of the remarks that God drops are not encouraging. Here's what the Holy One said earlier in sefer B'midbar: "I have taken the Levites from among the children of Israel instead of every first-born…and the Levites shall be Mine; for all the first-born are Mine. On the day that I smote all the first-born in the land of Egypt, I hallowed unto Me all the first-born in Israel, both man and beast."

In other words, I took the lives of hundreds of thousands of humans and animals on one night in Egypt, so now you owe me a limitless number of *your* lives, in perpetuity. What are we supposed to say—thank you? The fact that we've got an out-clause, to allow us to buy back the life of the first-born, isn't all that soothing, because it's clear that God is deadly serious. Go back earlier in the Torah, to where we're told what to do with a first-born animal that can neither be redeemed nor offered as a sacrifice. We have to break its neck. I know, we're not talking about

breaking a human's neck. But the thought lingers. And appropriately so, when we read in this week's parshah about the dedication of the Levites.

The Levites are chosen in place of the first-born "to do the service of the children of Israel in the tent of meeting, and to make atonement for the children of Israel, through the children of Israel coming near to the sanctuary." In the first place, we know what can happen when somebody comes near the sanctuary. Nadav and Avihu happens. In the second place, I notice that the Levites are chosen to "make atonement," or expiation, or ransom, for something that is assumed. If it hasn't happened already, it will.

How do the Levites make this atonement? Aaron presents them at the altar as a wave offering. Fortunately, after being subjected to whatever kind of waving was possible with a mass of people, they are not subjected to the next step in the process and incinerated. But it's fair to say that they are treated as if they now ought to be dead. And that's after they've been associated with the impurity of death. The Levites must first be cleansed and sprinkled—according to the rabbis, sprinkled with the water of the Red Heifer.

To me, this is all very creepy. And it's also puzzling—because it's strange that God should make the Levites the ritual substitute for the first-born of Israel. The logical choice would be Reuven. So why does God skip over them, and also skip the next-oldest, and settle on Levi?

What do we know about the Levites? The first thing that comes to my mind is a history of violence.

I'm not just talking about that unpleasantness in Shechem. That was bad enough. When your father, on his death bed, looks at you and says, "Keep that guy away from me," you know you've crossed a line. But the massacre in Shechem was only the first mass murder that the Levites committed.

After the Israelites worshipped the Golden Calf, Moses called for men to strap on their swords and stand with him—and the Levites were ready. They slaughtered 3,000 men in one day. Considering the circumstances, we're supposed to forgive this bloodshed, or even find it praiseworthy. But listen to the words of Moses: "Slay every man his brother, and every man his companion, and every man his neighbor." I lack the zeal of Pinchas. I hear this and think, "Is this really necessary? What kind of people would rush to murder their brothers, their companions, their neighbors?" The Levites—that's who.

And let's not forget who gives this order. Another Levite. Today's parshah calls Moses the most meek, humble man who ever lived. But we know what Mr. Meek was like in his youth. He beat a man to death and ran out of town. Moses had a history of violence of his own.

But let's say, for the sake of argument, that his fellow tribesmen were justified in the case of the Golden Calf, because they were faithful to God during a terrible rebellion. The problem is, they are a tribe whose violence can overflow. A couple of parshas from now, a considerable number of Levites will mount a rebellion of their own, under Korach's leadership. I assume they're ready to spill blood.

Put it this way: the Levites are a violent gang. And the leadership of Israel has come from their midst. Why doesn't God choose Reuven to be the sacrifice in place of the first-born? Because nobody from the tribe of Reuven rose up to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. The leadership came from the bad-asses. Which makes sense, even though we are to believe that God, not Moses, was the one with the strong hand and the outstretched arm. There had to be *some* human agent to carry out a slave revolt. And historically, slaves who have risen against their masters have not been the meekest men who ever lived.

But that's all background. Now that Levites have been dedicated as an offering, we face a pressing question. What will be the future of these people?

The immediate answer is, they're going to be treated like beasts of burden. It is of course the greatest of distinctions to serve in the Mishkan—but the Levites don't really get the honor. That belongs to the priests. The Levites aren't even allowed to touch the good stuff. They pack it up, shelp it away, unpack it, set it up again. Has anybody here ever packed for a spouse before a vacation, or packed for a child going off to summer camp? You love your spouse and your child, right? But how honored did you feel?

To put it bluntly, the Levites from now on will be drone labor. And the second thing in store for them is dispossession. They will be forbidden from owning farmland, the most basic and important form of wealth in an agricultural society. In effect, they are forced into being charity cases. They will live off tithes. From the writings of the prophets, we know how reliable those tithes could be. The Levites are fated for destitution.

They are also fated to be scattered. Although the purpose of their lives from now on is to serve in the Mishkan, and later in the Temple, most of them won't even be in the vicinity. They are going to live in cities set up in the territories of other tribes. And just so nobody forgets their history, six of the Levites' cities are going to be places of refuge for accused murderers.

Let's say you were responsible for a society that had a chronically violent gang of men in proximity to political power. That's a risk. You could live with it. Or you could declare them all officially dead, impose menial labor on them, prevent them from acquiring any wealth, and disperse them through the territories. I'm not saying this is historically what happened to the Levites. I have very little idea of what might actually have happened in ancient Israel, and I resist attempts to use literary speculation to justify truth claims in the Biblical text. That said, the text

presents a stark contrast between the behavior of the Levites in the past and their condition in the future.

Let me mention one more aspect of that future. After the Temple is built, the Levites will lose their usefulness as sacred shleppers. They will become the choir, and the gatekeepers. Again, these are supposed to be very high honors. But to me, they sound like the sort of assignment that useless workers got in the Soviet Union, just because everybody was required to have a job. The state invented positions like escalator monitor. You went into a department store, and somebody would be sitting all day in a chair at the foot of an escalator, and somebody would be sitting in a chair at the top. If you asked what one of these people was doing, all you'd be told was, the comrade is doing her job. So it was with the Levites. Some of these charity cases were given jobs opening and closing the gates and singing a song once a day.

That's why I've been worried about the Levites. And having told you about my anxieties, I will now proceed to an enlightening, inspiring, inspiriting conclusion.

Unlike the Levites, the Jews as a people did not have much of a history of violence. In warfare, we were net losers—and our kingdom at its most powerful was no more than a smudge on the map. We did not need to be de-fanged. But for much of the past two thousand years, it's fair to say that the Jews in general lived in a condition like that of the post-sacrifice Levites. We were landless, poor and scattered. We did menial jobs or engaged in struggling little businesses. A few of us had a reputation for being good with a fiddle or a song—but that was as much credit as the world was likely to give us.

We all became Levites—and we made something noble out of that life. Please understand, I don't want to sentimentalize a Jewish past full of suffering and humiliation and violent death. I would never want to go back to that. But just as the arch-Levite Moses became

the meekest of men, so did the Jews, in their Levitical dispossession, learn to become as elevated in spirit as Moses. Not all of us, of course. Never *all*. But in the aggregate, we directed our thoughts and actions beyond our misery, toward fulfilling the expectations of a God we regarded as just, merciful, and glorious. Never mind how many lives that God demanded, for reasons we will never fathom. Never mind that the world considered us to be as good as dead. We carried on as if our equivalent of the drone labor in the Mishkan was as great as it was supposed to be.

You could say we were nothing but holy fools, generation after generation. But I think these worrisome Levites gave us a lot to live up to. And I think they still do.

Shabbat shalom.

Let me begin by stating that Dina has given me leave to speak for her, as well.

I would like to compliment the Executive Board of Ansche Chesed for their decision to have the annual meeting on June 16th, Bloomsday. This is the day, in 1904, on which all of the episodes of James Joyce's *Ulysses* took place. It is an indication of the esteem we have for the board and of the appreciation we have for the award being bestowed on us that we are here rather than at Symphony Space for the Bloomsday performances this evening. This is especially true given that Fionnula Flanagan will be performing the Molly Bloom soliloquy, which is often done in the nude.

Leopold Bloom, the character in the book and not the accountant in *The Producers*, while not halachically a Jew, nonetheless exemplified many Jewish characteristics and would have to be considered for this award tonight. Joyce was very knowledgeable about Judaism and had a high opinion of Jews, higher, in fact, than many Jews have of one another. Joyce was aware of the Talmudic statement that we are all "compassionate children of compassionate ancestors," especially here at Ansche Chesed. Within the compass of the single day which constitutes *Ulysses*, Joyce has Bloom help a blind boy across a busy thoroughfare, attend Patty Dignam's funeral, spearhead the raising of money for widow Dignam, visit Mrs. Purefoy in the maternity ward of the hospital and help and protect a drunk Stephen Daedalus in a rough part of Dublin. All in one day. How many opportunities there are to be among the ansche chesed.

You honor the wrong people today- Dina and I, Jack Stevenson, the members of the Family Social Action Committee and Izzy Fridman-the scum of the earth. Every year you make the same mistake. We, who receive these awards, have learned, usually initially by happenstance, how utterly rewarding, how completely gratifying it is to be of use to the community. We are the selfish ones. I walk about in dread of that awful, inevitable day when someone will accost me in a dark alley and say: "You bastard! You've monopolized this mitzvah long enough! I want a piece of the action!" But Dina and I try to keep a low profile precisely so that we can continue to Bogart this mitzvah. That's why we even tried to dodge this award.

The parshah we started to read this week, Shlach-Lecha, concludes with the commandment of tzitzit which is introduced in order to serve the following purpose: "You shall be reminded to observe all My commandments and be holy to your God." Many people have the custom of saying the word "tizkrew" with a very exaggerated zzz sound so as to clearly distinguish "you shall be reminded" from "tisk'ru,""you shall be rewarded" by observing commandments. But that is exactly what the low-lifes whom you persist in giving awards to do. I warn you. If you persevere in this egregious fashion, others may be similarly encouraged.

I am proof that there is always some role by which anyone can serve the community. I can't leyn, but I can carry and roll the sefer Torah. Of course, Eric has now outflanked me on that one. I can't lead davening but I can assist in various minor ways with the service. I can't cook but I can clean. I can't stand committee work but I can write a check. I can't teach Talmud but I can bring single-malt scotch.

Finally, I wanted to acknowledge the person for whom this award is named. Eugene Klein was a Holocaust survivor and a survivor of what had begun to look like the last generation of Jews that were ever going to attend Ansche Chesed. Mr. Klein was delighted that new, young members began to appear, starting in the late 1970s. Mr. Klein didn't resent or feel threatened by these newcomers who took over the shul

responsibilities. He was thrilled to see children in the lobby and hallways of Ansche Chesed again and thereby to know that his shul would continue. He was the last true, shul-wide candy man AC had, distributing candy to every child who appeared. In his memory I offer the hope that all of our children will become daughters and sons of compassion and good deeds. THROW

Howard L. Berkowitz
June 16, 2008

Parasha Shlakh L'kha

29 June 2019

1737 words

As so many have said, this parasha, Shlakh L'kha, is one of my favorites. I have tender memories of acting it out with my children when they were small. We imagined ourselves as the scouts in the Promised Land as we prowled around the back yard of our house in California.

But here I am focusing on one brief section, 15:37-41, the commandment about tzitzit, the fringes in the garments, and the blue thread in the fringes. Seeing this thread will make the Jews remember and carry out the commandments, not going astray, but being holy unto God. These words form the third paragraph of the Sh'ma, recited every morning and evening.

This section serves me, you should excuse the pun, as a pre-text, because I want to speak about the words that follow it. They form a blessing, the emet v'yatziv, all of it worthy of attention. I will focus on its opening.

It's a list of adjectives that describe the Shma itself. It begins with one, emet, true, a word which recurs again later on, and continues on with fifteen more. This list has long impressed me. I was particularly struck, when Judy and I joined the minyan, how many people dove into it, knowing It perfectly, moving briskly through it, getting ready for the Amidah that comes soon after. I admired this level of familiarity and facility, but I have also felt an impulse to slow down a moment, and really look at this list.

Emet, v'yatsiv, v'nachon, v'kayam, v'yashar, v'ne'eman, v'ahoov, v'chaviv, v'nechmad, v'na'eem, v'nora, v'adeer, v'm'tookan, v'm'koobal, v'tov, v'yafeh.

True, and certain, and established, and enduring, and fair, and faithful, and beloved, and cherished, and delightful, and pleasant, and awesome, and mighty, and correct, and accepted, and good, and beautiful.

Why so many adjectives, why these adjectives? What does reciting this list do for us?

I found myself imagining what would have happened, if the people who composed the siddur workshopped it in a creative writing program. They might receive negative feedback. Someone might just scribble in the margin of a copy, "tl;dr, too long, didn't read." Or someone, seeking to provide more guidance, might say, "Look, I don't mean to be harsh, but this just looks like a thesaurus dump. And besides, adjectives are weak, how many times have they told us that? You did some good work with that kedusha. Maybe come up with something along those lines."

To be sure, there is a logic to having many adjectives. We've just proclaimed the unity of God. So a multiplicity of adjectives underscores that unity. Monotheism often creates a pressure give voice to the many different experiences of the divine. Our God has many names, we have many verbs to describe the praise and thanks and blessings we give to God. And here we press language to its limits, drawing on it to find words to convey our recognition for God's many characteristics. And I don't think God is impatient, sitting up there on a throne, going, 'okay I get it, you're grateful, what else is new?' I think God is listening intently. And we can as well.

To make sense of this list, some commentators have focused on the number 16. Enoch Zundel ben Yosef discusses this in his Etz Yosef, a commentary on

Midrash Rabbah, and points out that the adjectives correspond to the 16 lines of the Sh'ma. That's a good catch. It invites an effort to match each adjective to each line. Some of the associations are apt, others seem forced.

Others have seen the 16 as a set of eight pairs, pointing out that in this way they correspond to the eight strands of the tzitzit. There's a long history of seeing these as pairs. The Talmud refers to the text by the words of the first pair, emet v'yatziv, in Berakhot 12/Zera'im and in Tamid 5/Kedoshim. And the various melodies with which it is chanted, at least the ones I found online, underscore this coupling as well.

Taken as pairs, the adjectives tell a story. One can imagine a scene in a film, a close shot of the person who recites these words, experiencing different emotions. The list opens with the recognition of the veracity of the Shma 'true, and certain, and established, and enduring' and shifts to its appeal 'beloved, and cherished, and delightful, and pleasant', and then to its power, 'awesome, and mighty.' It moves to our taking on our love of God and the mitzvot, 'correct and accepted' and closes with our feeling as we hold it 'good and beautiful.'

I thought about this sequence of emotions, and felt that I still hadn't grasped something. If the middle has this sweep, what about the beginning and end of the series. These are some of the most basic and most abstract of adjectives. How is the sequence anchored at its ends? Going back to the writing program view, what is the hook, and what is the kicker?

I was puzzled by the opening adjective, emet, true. Why would any religious text need to state that it is true? Are we like the anxious Woody Allen in

Broadway Danny Rose, announcing, "it's the emes." I wondered whether the unity of God, in the Sh'ma, could be a point in particular need of underscoring

I got an answer from the 18th century Vilna Siddur, which contains a set of 16 verses from the Tanakh, corresponding to each adjective. For emet, it provides Jeremiah 10:10 "But the Lord God is the true God, He is the living God, and the everlasting King; At His wrath the earth trembles, And the nations are not able to abide His indignation". The truth here is not the truth of a statement, the correspondence between the meaning of a sentence and external reality. Rather, it is the truth of God's presence in the world, the truth of God's strength, which can defend Israel.

The final adjectives were even more puzzling to me. Tov, good: What is religion, what is God if not good? What religion would say, no, we are not good at all?

If Immanuel Kant, the great philosopher of the German Enlightenment, had edited the emet v'yatziv, he likely would have deleted everything except these two words, emet and tov. He knew a fair amount of Hebrew—he changed his name from Emanuel to Immanuel after studying it-- and almost certainly knew these words. He sought to establish a rational, universal basis for ethical conduct, linking the good with the true. Building on this link, he became an early supporter of constitutional republics. He had immense appeal to his contemporary Moses Mendelssohn and to the 19th century Liberal Jews in Germany, who also sought a more abstract, transcendental Judaism.

Or perhaps it is not obvious that God is good. Bad things happen to good people, as we know, and as we see in the Book of Job, a righteous man, sorely

punished because of a God's petty response to a taunt from Satan. Kant struggled with the Book of Job, as many did, finding it near-impossible to reconcile with a God who is good.

But perhaps this hope of a patient, kind, wise, loving God is more a Protestant image than our own, as if God were to manage the universe more or less the same way that Mr. Rogers cares for his neighborhood. There's a clue about the nature of goodness in the Siddur Vilna's pairing. For tov it offers Psalms 145:9 "The Lord is good to all; And His tender mercies are over all His works." This is close to Psalm 136 Hodu l'adonay ki tov, ki l'olam khasdo. O give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good, for His mercy endures forever. God's goodness consists in specific acts of goodness and mercy; we hope for them, but we don't take them for granted. And we thank God for each and every one. The Amidash offers us a beautiful line, sab'eynu mituvekha, v'sam'kheynu biyshuatekha / satisfy us with your goodness, and lead us to rejoice in your salvation. In other words, we may not get goodness all the time, but we get enough of it. And moreover salvation is in the wings. This isn't Kant's goodness, or his politics, but it is ours. And it is a basis for an ethical society as well.

And what of the first word and the very last word, emet and yofe, true and beautiful? For me, this suggests another figure outside our tradition, the Romantic poet Keats. His "Ode on a Grecian Urn" evokes young figures painted on a vase, preserved against the passage of time. He describes scenes of love and of music-making, and, of another scene that might have come from our Torah, he asks, "To what green altar, O mysterious priest, /Lead'st thou that

heifer lowing at the skies." The ode reflects on these moments and ends with a message from the Greeks to us: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty, —that is all/Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."

It might seem that the text from the Vilna Siddur matches Keats in a way: Song of Songs 1:16 (16) Behold, thou art beautiful, my beloved, yea, pleasant; Also our couch is leafy.

This beauty is a beauty of desire and passion, like the beauty that the young poet saw in the ancient vase. But Keats is outside the vase. Its instruments are silent to him. "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard/ Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;/ Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,/ Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone." Unlike Keats, we do hear the melodies; in fact, we sing them ourselves.

Keats' ode draws on a wider vocabulary than the emet v'yatziv, even if it is more measured in its use of adjectives. It has a more complex structure and more varied rhythms. But it is a comment on a distant, ancient work of visual art. For us, the emet v'yatziv, also distant and ancient in origin, is a work of verbal art which we create afresh. As we daven, we inhabit the poem-blessing directly. As we shape the sixteen rhythmic adjectives with our breath, we renew the unity of holiness. Sixteen words are not too many to affirm our place in the order of creation, as we prepare to stand before our God.

# KORACH

## Ron Lee Meyers – Minyan Maat – 9 July 2016

A parasha about a populist uprising couldn't be better timed, in the run-up to the Republican convention that will nominate Donald Trump, or in the shock and paralysis following the Brexit vote. Populist revolts can be inscrutable, their goals are often inarticulate. But there is no question that they reflect real and particular anger of their times. And as such, there is no question that they reflect the deep and immediate concerns that form people's lives and identities.

The Trump and Brexit anger are expressed in terms of national identity and economic opportunity. Korach's revolt is expressed in terms of holiness. There may be a number of similarities between Korach's revolt and Trump's – a disgust with the elite, for example. But to read Korach expressing holiness as a central concern makes me realize the vast differences between Korach's society and our own.

I thought about this nearly a year ago when David Shapiro and I were discussing his idea for this year's mega-issues dinner, the question of whether we, Minyan Maat, are a holy community. I wasn't able to attend the dinner, but I've been thinking about this question ever since. I find it provocative exactly because we, unlike Korach, do not live in the conceptual framework of holiness. Our legal culture is defined by concepts of procedural fairness and reasonableness. Our medical culture is defined by concepts of safety and efficacy. We have learned to examine our inner lives in terms of expression and repression, nature and

nurture. So what parts of lives are defined by holiness, and what does holiness even mean?

I witnessed a struggle over this question a number of years ago when I attended a lecture by a prominent rabbi, who spoke of the rewards of studying theology seriously and of developing one's own strong concept of Gd. The audience was a congregation (not this one), which included many mental health professionals. And it was amazing to see how many of them asked – with remarkable persistence – whether the satisfactions of theology could possibly be any greater than the rewards of psychotherapy. Or whether in fact theology is really just the mythological gloss on a process that is ultimately one of personal psychological exploration.

I happened to know that this rabbi's wife is herself a psychotherapist, and I'm sorry to say that he eventually gave in and granted that a deep, deep knowledge of one's self may be as profound an experience as knowledge of Gd. I was disappointed that he conceded the point, but I forgive him – I think he was on the spot, and I don't think he really meant it. For example, when I asked whether the exaltation of theology can be matched by the exaltation of hearing a Beethoven symphony, he dismissed it as the kind of question he would get from an undergraduate.

What's interesting to me about this memory is that it was a discussion of the many kinds of exaltation that we can experience, and of the fact that not all of them are experiences of holiness. It is not the case that all elevated experiences

converge into a unified experience of holiness. When we feel the fireworks of the mind or the spirit, we are not feeling the same thing in each instance.

When we enjoyed the real, physical fireworks this past Monday, we were commemorating one of the extraordinary events in history – an elevated event in our heritage that continues to elevate us today. So, what type of exaltation do we feel on the Fourth of July? Is American independence an experience of holiness? We are often moved to honor American freedom and democracy in a devotional vein. One of our alternate prayers for our country speaks of good government under the Constitution as the benchmark for a Gd-blessed nation. And if you were here on the Shabbat of Memorial Day weekend several weeks ago, you would have heard nothing other than the Gettysburg Address, in Hebrew, recited as the haftarah.

I loved that haftara. It was truly moving. But I still question whether our political condition is a holy state. Jefferson's phrase, "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness", gave a precise name to the particular anger of his times. And the universality of these concepts helped to turn one particular populist revolt into a flash-point of human actualization, inspiring one liberation movement after another to expand the scope of human rights and dignity.

But however lofty and influential the Declaration of Independence might be, its claims are not claims of holiness. Politics is not a matter of the divine or the eternal; it occurs – in the words of the Declaration itself – "in the course of human events". Jefferson justified our human aspirations by invoking the divine, claiming

that our inalienable rights are an endowment from our Creator, and that when we separate ourselves from a tyrant, we are entitled to do so by Nature and Nature's Gd.

...But all of this sounds to me quite a lot like Korach. We are "endowed", we are "entitled", "we are all holy". The Declaration aspires to holiness but falls short, for the same reason that Korach falls short. Which is: that holiness is not about what you are given, it's about what you give. It is not an endowment, it is not an entitlement. It is not a feature of what you are, it's a result of what you do.

When Korach says "kol ha-edah kulam kedoshim" (the whole community is holy), he is mis-remembering Gd's commandment that "You shall be holy" ("kedoshim tihiyu". Gd's statement is not a description, it's a prescription. He is not praising us, he is commanding us to be worthy of praise.

Our natural endowments – what we like to call Gd-given talents – are impressive to behold, but they're not that interesting. What we make of them what's interesting. Some of us here might recall when Andre Agassi was the most naturally talented young tennis player anyone had ever seen. He won easily, and while he made a name for himself as an athlete, he made just as much of a name for himself as an arrogant punk, because winning a tournament wasn't that much harder for him than moussing his hair. But when winning got harder, he had to dig down and build the skill and the heart of a champion. That's when he got interesting and made himself worthy of his talent.

Digging down and building is how we begin to activate our endowments. It's how we begin to justify our good fortune in having received them. So, for me, this is one piece of the answer about holiness. Listening to Beethoven might give me extraordinary pleasure. But it's not until I make the effort to play Beethoven that I am actually making anything of what Gd gave me.

But does that effort constitute holiness, merely by the fact that I'm exerting myself? I think it's pretty obvious that it matters quite a lot what we are exerting ourselves for.

Arnie Eisen sent around an email last weeks that speaks to this. He recalled his teacher, the sociologist Philip Reiff, whose book, "The Triumph of the Therapeutic" examines the goals that we pursue to give meaning to our lives. Rieff observes that in an individualistic, democratic society – one where we are concerned with our individual lives, liberty and happiness – we tend to take a detached and intellectual view of society. And this in turn leads us to seek our solace not in the fullness of society but the isolation of verbal therapy, which may be deeply informative but is unlikely to ever be transformative.

So, there's the rabbi's answer to the clamoring psychotherapists. Therapy can be very important, and it may even be an indispensable way of dealing with our individualized experiences in modern life. But transformation is something else, and it lies outside the self.

The simplest way of imagining this might be the very basic idea that when people come together, we create more than what was there before. Levinas explains that every person, through his uniqueness [guarantees] the revelation of a unique aspect of truth. And some of its points would never [be] revealed if some people had been absent from mankind". Which leads us to the idea that while we need to dig in and give of ourselves to help build the world, we don't need to play Beethoven and we don't need to win Wimbeldon. We need to be ourselves; to discover what is within us to give; to give it to others; and to live among others.

Pirkei Avot reminds us how simply we can attract and generate holiness just by coming together with another person. "When two people sit and speak words of Torah, the Divine Presence rests among them." In the modest act of studying together, one plus one equals three.

People coming together is at the core of holiness. Our friend Marcia Pally has recently published a terrific new book, called "Commonwealth and Covenant", which is all about the centrality of relationship in any notion of holiness. A current is generated between the divine spirits in two people that cannot arise in the individual alone. Marcia explains that "being in covenant with Gd entails covenant with those in whom Gd's spirit inheres". And the converse is also is also true: covenant with persons involves a covenant with Gd – as Marcia envisions it, the two bonds are intertwined like a Mobius strip. When we gather together to be more than our individual selves, Gd steps in to make us more than the sum of our parts. Marcia notes that "Gd's spirit of righteousness is given to the nation to help it carry out what Gd knows it can." There is more between heaven and

earth, there is more within ourselves, than we might dream of in our individual philosophies; but Gd has dreamt of it, and holiness is the phenomenon of our bringing it forth.

So I come around to understanding holiness as the commitment amongst ourselves to animate our potentials and to generate something that is more than the sum of ourselves. I feel very deeply blessed to have such a rich endowment as the inalienable rights to life, liberty and happiness. But what good are those rights if we are alienated from them? What good are they unless we work to sustain a credible political system in which to express them? And what good are they, indeed, to people who are susceptible to random murder in traffic stops and peace rallies?

What a current of holiness can we generate when we use our own lives, our own liberty and our own happiness to help others more fully realize their lives, their liberty and their happiness?

Jefferson finally gets around to this idea in the very last line of the Declaration, and it's significant that that this communal commitment is the one thing in the whole document that he describes in clearly sacred terms. When he breaks through the talk of Gd-given rights and calls upon us to pledge our lives and our fortunes in realizing the promise of those rights, it is only then that he can finally, and correctly, speak of our sacred Honor.

**Korach**

Shabbat shalom—or gut shabbos, as the case may be.

I observed that yahrzeit of my father just three days ago, and I will observe my mother's yahrzeit very soon, on the fifth of Av. This drash is in their memory.

Though I'm not sure they would have liked being associated with anything so terrible as parshat Korach. This is the lowest point in the Torah, worse even than the episode of the Golden Calf. You might even say it's like the episode of the Gold Calf and all the other catastrophes combined. Korach is a rprise of the deaths of Nadav and Avihu, but with a grand-scale offering of strange fire. It's a repetition of the treason of the spies, but with 250 chieftains instigating the trouble, instead of 10. Here, once more, plague breaks out against the complainers and murmurers, but now in the heart of the camp, not at the edges. And in a terrible parody of the revelation at Sinai, the whole congregation—the phrase is repeated—the whole congregations witnesses God in its midst, and instead of obeying, revolts. This is worse than the Golden Calf. It's the absolute rejection of all authority, of all legitimacy.

How can the people dare to defy God in this way? They can do it because they feel they have nothing to lose anymore. What's God going to do, kill them? They're already doomed. They will die in the desesrt—and until they do, they can look forward to nothing except wandering about and eating the same thing, day after day, until they drop. White flakes of manna. It's as if the people were gathering and eating the scales of leprosy—of a living death. They can hang on, and get forty years' worth of this. Or they can throw themselves into revolutionary suicide, as people called it in the Sixties, and dare God to kill them right now.

Who, among the whole congregation, is most responsible for this revolt born of despair? The representatives of the firstborn. Three descendants of Reuven, along with Korach and his Levites, who are dedicated to God in place of the firstborn. On top of all the other combined catastrophes, we have a

new, wholesale slaughter of the firstborn, except this time among the Israelites. And the great, never-before-seen miracle that makes the experience really special is that they're swallowed up by the earth, which closes over them—much as Pharaoh's army was swallowed by the sea.

"Is it a small thing that you brought us up out of the land flowing the milk and honey, to put us to death in the desert?" There is a terrible accuracy in these words. The plauges that the Israelites were spared in Egypt are now being visited upon them in the wilderness.

If you are someone who wants to look into the abyss, then here it is. The very language of the parsha is chaotic, fragmentary, violent, as if the text were clashing with itself. You'll notice how people keep describing thing as either being too much or appearing too small. The sense of scale, of proportion, has been lost. And intentionality, too, is gone. The very first sentence of the parsha—Vayikach Korach, and Korach took—leaves you baffled, despite all the ingenuity that the rabbis exercised upon it, because no matter how you explain away the grammatical puzzle, you still listen for an object of the verb but hear only silence. Korach took *what*? It doesn't seem to mater. There's no clear, purpose, but only a blind *taking.*

I feel as if this ought to be the end—not just of the Israelites, but of everything.

And yet, of course, it's not. At the most terrible of all moments in the Torah, Moses and Aaron take matters into their own hands, without consulting God, without asking for permission. Aaron picks up an impossible deadly objects and without authorization carries it out of the mishkan, into the middle of the people. And there he stands, "ben hametim uven hachayim," between the dead and the living. Picture it. When the rebellion was in progress, Moses had said, "What's Aaron, that you should revolt against *him*?" The ultimate put-down of the older brother who didn't quite make it. But now you see what Aaron is: the man who takes something out of God's own hands, and puts his body on the border between death and life, and stands.

There is a kind of pride here, but not the pride of Korach, who just wants to take. There is an insane recklessness, but not the recklessness of the revolutionary suicie. If you want the Torah's image of legitimate authority, I'd say this is it. And I want to propose to you that Aaron truly become the Cohen Gadol only at this moment. He didn't do it when he put on the clothes, and went through the ceremonies, and dutifully followed every item on the checklist. He becomes the Cohen Gadol now, after he's seen the breakdown of all authority, when in full knowledge that he's acting on his own, he runs out to try to hold back death itself.

The proof isn't just that he succeeds in stopping the plague. It's that, from this point onward, things get better again. By his action, by his example, Aaron gives the Israelites a foundation for rebuilding a society that had never entirely coalesced in the deserth, and that has just fallen completely apart. And the foundation he offers, paradoxically enough, has nothing to do with the meticulous ritual order we usually associate with the priesthood. Just the opposite. It's about a willingness to disregard the sacred order, if need be, and act on your own atuhority, for the sake of people who only yesterday were calling for your head.

Now I realize, I'm giving a modern and American reading of Korach. A reading that defers to our understanding of Korach as an ancient text—as much of an understanding as we can muster—would call this a legitimizing fable, meant to justify the privileges of the priestly line. But it all depends on where you find the legitimacy. Does it reside inherently in the sacred firepan, which Aaron alone is permitted to handle? Or does it reside in a sudden flash of potentiality in Aaron's character, which permits him to dare this action? I think this second aspect can't be ignored—and because of it, the story overflows the narrow channel of its meaning. Yes, it's about the right of Aaron's descendants to officiate as priests. But it's also about the courage of this one man, who will himself die soon, to come forward in the midst of a complete social breakdown.

May we, too, know when to disregard the rules for the sake of saving others. May we, too, run to use whatever power is in our hands, if others are in danger and there is no one but us to help. And if because of it we should sometimes be called arrogant meddlers and do-gooders, bleeding hearts or beautiful souls—it's been known to happen—let's remember that these are all just ways for someone to say, Rav lachem. You take too much on yourself.

Good.

Shabbat shalom.

**Love and Hate in Chukath and Balak**
**Minyan Ma'at**
**July 15, 2000**
**Leon Hoffman**

**How much have things changed in the last three millennia?**

Yesterday Linda Gradstein from NPR reported on *All Things Considered* from Jerusalem. She spoke with a Jewish woman building a new house in a community barely a couple of kilometers from Ramallah. This woman wasn't at all clear to herself that they would be able to live under Palestinian rule (since it is likely that this settlement will be returned to the Palestinian). The people in the community have guns and are ready for any violence that may arise.

On the other side, a woman, who left Acco at 17 in 1948, and is one of some 350,000 Palestinian refugees living in Lebanon, still dreams of living in Palestine and doubts that Arafat will insist that she can go back home. A Lebanese official says that it is impossible for the 350,000 Palestinians to be integrated into Lebanon society because of all of the disruptions that would occur.

Reading Chukath and Balak certainly reminds us that the conflicts in the Levant have really not changed during all of our recorded history. Take for example the description in Chapter 21, beginning at verse 21.

The children of Israel sent messengers to Sihon, King of the Amorites to allow them to pass peacefully through his land. He would not allow that and attacked the Israelites who then defeated them, with the Israelites settling in all of the towns of the Amorites, in Heshbon and all of its dependencies.

The next verse (verse 26) then reads, "Now Heshbon was the city of Sihon king of the Amorites, who had fought against a former king of Moab and taken all his land from him as far as the Arnon."

Rashi asks, "Why is it necessary that this should be written? Because it is said, 'Harass not Moab,' and Heshbon belonged to Moab (and therefore should not have been attacked), it (Scripture) tells us that Sihon had taken it from them (Moab), and through him it (Heshbon) became permissible to Israel as an object of attack."

What is even more interesting, is the poem that follows, a poem gloating over the defeated Moabites:

"Come to Heshbon; firmly built
And well founded in Sihon's city

For fire went forth from Heshbon,

Flame from Sihon's city,

Consuming Ar of Moab,

The Lords of Bamoth by the Arnon.

Woe to you, O Moab!

You are undone, O people of Chemosh!

His sons are rendered fugitive

And his daughters captive

By an Amorite king, Sihon.

Yet we have cast them down utterly,

Heshbon along with Dibon;

We have wrought desolation at Nopah,

Which is hard by Medeba."

The JPS Commentary on Numbers has a fascinating discussion about this poem, relating various theories as to why the Song of Heshbon should be included in the Torah (similar to Rashi's question).

Scholars, the JPS says, consider two theories: one, hypothesizes that it is a 9th Century composition celebrating Omri's conquest of Moab and another, to taunt

the Amorites, challenging them to rebuild their capital as they did after they captured Moab.

A third theory is that it is the work of an Amorite bard celebrating the Amorite victory over the Moabites. Such a theory, that the poem is the insertion of a non-Israelite production into the Torah, the editor of the JPS says, is consistent with rabbinic commentaries, like the Rashi comment I quoted—that the Israelites had to rationalize why they occupied the lands of the Moabites, despite God's injunction against that.

So we see that regardless of our degree of sophistication and development, it is always possible to find a theory to justify one's political aspirations and activity. For example, how many people now realize that the word "Palestinian," not too many years ago, referred to the Jewish settlers of Palestine and not to the Arabs? The word now obviously denotes a very different ethnic group. Or are we so different from one another?

Perhaps this difference and non-difference gives us a clue as to why there is such continued animosity amongst the peoples of the Levant, as there is among so many peoples who lived and live very close to one another in a continuous, intertwined

hostile dependency. The Moslems and the Hindus, the Catholics and the Protestants, reminiscent of the old Tom Lehrer song—and "everybody hates the Jews." But what about the Gypsies and the Blacks? Of course the list is endless—but the Jews and the Palestinians mean more to us, so of course, we think of that perpetual conflict as the quintessential one.

If we look at these two parshiot (read together as one unit) leads me to propose one hypothesis—in which I consider relating the perpetual social and political conflicts to individual wishes and prohibitions.

This section begins with a discussion of the Red Cow (Parah adumah) and how to make the impure pure and, most paradoxically, how the agent of purification actually renders the one who does the act of purification to become impure. Purity and impurity, sacred and profane are inevitably inextricably linked with one another.

In the parsha we then read a long discussion, which includes the death of 2 of the 3 leaders of the Israelites (Miriam and Aaron), the punishment of the political leaders because of their arrogance, in essence acting autonomously against the word of God, and the interactions between the Israelites with the various peoples in the

area, as they continue their long march towards their political goal of conquest of the land. We read the story of Balak and Balaam, which in itself would be the topic of another discussion, but which, in the plain sense, is part of the social history of the Israelites as they interact with their friends and foes, with God always being the ultimate agent responsible for the march of history.

We then come to the end of these two parshiot. We began by reading how to purify, the impure, particularly the impurity associated with a corpse, "He who touches a corpse of any human being shall be unclean for seven days. He shall cleanse himself with it [the ashes of the red cow] on the third day and on the seventh day, and then shall be clean;"

And we end this section (in Chapter 25) by learning that while staying at a place called Shittim, the Israelites profaned themselves by whoring with the women of Moab, leading to severe punishment: 24,000 dying from a plague and most dramatically, we read how Pinhas, the grandson of Aaron (who is rewarded by God in the next section), stabs in the stomach an Israelite man and a Moabite woman who are in the midst of the profane act. Rashi, in fact is more graphic, saying that "he miraculously struck exactly at Zimri's (we learn the Israelite's name in the

next section) male and her female parts so that everyone could plainly perceive that he had not killed them without just cause."

In other words, do we hear Rashi, once again, pleading with us by finding a rationalization, for an unjustified act of aggression? And again both of these aggressive actions involve Moab: the land of Moabites was taken—justly taken he tells us—not from Moab but from the Amorites (who took it from them); and the Israelite was justly punished because of his forbidden act with the Moabite woman. Israelites and Moabites inextricably linked together—but with love of (or union with) one another forbidden. Yet, Ruth, the Moabite woman will become the ancestor of the unifying leader, King David and the original Moab, "me'avi," "from my father," the issue of the incestuous union between Lot (Abraham's nephew) and his oldest daughter.

Coming full circle—like siblings hating and loving each other—how can we (Jew and Arab, and of course all of humanity) come to terms with those with whom we are closest? Why can the hatred between former lovers (or even current lovers), between siblings, between geographical neighbors become so intense and always seem so unresolvable?

I wonder whether we can extrapolate a reason for why these bitter hates and disputes (whether personal or political) remain so unresolvable without any real solutions by looking at the 2 examples of Rashi's rationalization. Rashi basically rationalizes activity which otherwise should be condemned—an unjust aggressive act against a neighbor and an unjust aggressive act against 2 individuals. Close relations can certainly be kindred spirits. But they could also be terrible competitors and rivals. In such a state, it is very easy to demonize one's rival and to find rational reasons for one's anxiety, for one's hate, and for one's aggressive acts. And once a cycle of hate and retribution is in place it is very difficult to extricate oneself from it.

In a magnificent little new book, "Freud's Megalomania" (a novel about a lost manuscript of Freud's), there's a neat very relevant quote from Norbert Weiner (one of the founders of cybernetics) about Game Theory:

"...In many cases, however, where there are three players, and in the overwhelming majority of cases, when the number of players is large, the result is one of extreme indeterminacy and instability. The individual players are compelled by their own cupidity to form coalitions; but these coalitions do not generally establish themselves in any single determinate way, and usually terminate in a welter of

betrayal, turncoatism, and deception, as is only too true a picture of the higher business life, or the closely related lives of politics, diplomacy, and war. In the long run, even the most brilliant hucksters become tired of this and agree to live in peace with one another, and the great rewards are reserved for the one who watches for an opportune time to break his agreement and betray his companions."

Are we humans condemned to suffer at the hands of those who will betray us? Or can we find a route where rivalry and competition can live side by side with love and harmony? We have to remember that, like with the Parah Adumah—the pure and the impure, the sacred and the profane—love and aggression will be forever linked with one an another.

Shabat shalom

Dvar Torah Chukat Ben Orlove 1 July 2017

Like a number of the other parashas in Bmidbar [Numbers], our parasha this week, Chukat, includes a mix of disparate elements. Whether one views the placement of these elements as the product of the mind of the divine one, or as the result of many generations of skilled story-tellers and editors among our forebears, or as being both of these, it is indisputable that these elements are highly varied. They include narratives of the wanderings in the desert, laws and commandments, poetry and song. It's often a challenge to seek a thread that unites such elements in any week's parashah, and possibly a mistake as well. The division of the Torah into parashahs is not like the organization of a tightly-plotted novel into coherent chapters, but rather the apportioning of an immense, complex work into manageable segments of similar length. So it often makes more sense simply to pick one element from the parashah and focus on that.

However, there is something that flows through Chukat, quite literally: water. The parashah opens with the laws of that strange never-seen creature, the red heifer. If it is properly slaughtered, it can be ritually burned along with a set of three specific plants. Three people are involved in this ritual preparation: the priest who slaughters the heifer, the man who burns the heifer, and the one who collects the ashes. The resulting ashes, if gathered up by someone who is clean, can serve to restore the ritual purity of those who have come into contact with the dead. The great paradox is that the ashes themselves contaminate the clean person who has touched them, so that he himself requires purification. It's as if the ashes were a cosmic toggle switch. This section is widely recognized as one of the most puzzling of the Torah, a commandment which seems designed to demonstrate the need to take at least some things entirely on faith.

Water plays an important role here, perhaps one less widely recognized than the heifer and her ashes. For one thing, the priest who slaughters the heifer, and the person who's used the ashes to purify himself, need to wash themselves and their clothes; the one who removes the ashes just needs to wash his clothes. In English, we use just one verb, wash, but Hebrew has two,

lirchōtz for washing the body, l'khabeis for washing clothes. Some English translations mark this difference by using the verb bathe for the body, the verb wash for clothes, and I will follow that use. Strikingly, the man who burns the heifer is commanded explicitly to wash his clothes in water: Hasreif otah y'khabeis b'gadaiv b'mayim. The Torah almost never mentions water when instructions are given to wash clothes or wool or leather. It's understood that l'khabeis involves water. The only other case, besides this one, occurs in Vayikra [Leviticus] 15:17, when a man who has had a nocturnal emission is told to wash in water any cloth or leather that the semen has touched. So there seems to be something really polluting about these ashes, a concern which is assuaged by the explicit mention of water and the suggestion of its ability to restore purity to cloth or leather.

And it's water that transmits the paradoxical purification of the ashes. The ashes alone can't do the trick. They have to be mixed with water, more specifically running water—living water in the Hebrew, mayim chayeem, before they can be sprinkled on the person who touched a dead body, or on other objects that touched them. The chapter ends with a reminder that the sprinkler, as well as the sprinklee, has to bathe his body in water and wash his clothes.

And the parashah moves to the next chapter, chapter 20. Miriam dies; the next verse tells us that there's no water for the congregation, and once again the Israelites are dissatisfied. They rebel against Moses. "Would that we had perished when our brothers perished before the Lord," they say. Robert Alter, whose translation I'm using, comments, "To mention the most recent episode, Dathan and Abiram and their followers were swallowed up by the earth, Korah and his people incinerated—instantaneous deaths that now seem preferable to slow death by thirst." In this, he is following Rashi, who simply says, "For dying of thirst is uglier."

The Israelites may have water on their mind when they mention their hunger as well. They praise the land of slavery, Egypt over what they call the makom hara, evil place, through which they have been wandering. They lament the absence of the foods produce by the waters of Egypt's ever-present river, the grains that are cultivated in the lands moistened by the Nile's

annual flood, the figs and grapes and pomegranates sustained by irrigation canals that tap the Nile.

In this tense situation, with thirst driving the people to challenge their leaders, God offers Moses a solution. Take your rod, he tells him, and speak to the rock, so that it will bring forth water. But Moses is stressed out, and, like many people in that state, he speaks inappropriately and thrashes around. He addresses the crowd as rebels, and strikes the rock twice. It brings forth abundant water, mayim rabeem. The people and the animals all drink. So far, so good, until we hear God tell Moses won't get to enter the Promised Land because of this.

After this point, the Israelites and Moses show a greater unity. Perhaps the people are satisfied with the water, or Moses is chastened by his punishment. Or maybe they are simply driven together by the presence of an enemy, the Edomites, through whose lands they have to travel on their way to the Promised Land. Once again, water appears prominently. Moses has a request for the King of Edom: "Let us, pray, pass through your land. We will not pass through field or vineyard and we will not drink water from wells." I think that Moses is using water as a bargaining chip: not only won't we take any grains or grapes, we won't even drink your water, that's how you'll know we will hurry through.

But the King of Edom won't have anything to do with the Israelites. Aaron dies. The Israelites take another route and have another encounter—more successful—with a local kingdom, Arad. The people complain again about the lack of bread and the lack of water. Once again they oppose God and Moses, who seem to be back to working together more effectively. God sends poisonous snakes, many people died, the survivors repent, and God tells Moses to make a serpent on bronze and put it up on a pole. The people who look at this bronze serpent are able to survive snakebites, so all is okay.

The story continues, the wanderings pick up again, and water reappears. The Israelites move from campsite to campsite. We get a short bit of poetry from an otherwise unknown book, whose title is given as "The Book of the Battles of the Lord." The poem recites the names of the places, speaking of valleys with whirlwinds and waterfalls.

And then they come to a place called B'er. The name means Well. And it's here that water makes a remarkable appearance in our parashah.

God says to Moses, "Gather the people, that I may give them water." And they sing a song,

"Rise up, O well!

Sing out to it.

Well, that captains dug,

the people's nobles delved it,

With a scepter, with a walking stick."

The next verse of the parashah picks up the journey once again, with a list of places where the Israelites camped. Commentators have read these in the light of the song. Some think that the first two campsites, Midbar and Mattanah, are part of the song itself, since they can be read "From the desert, a gift." Others use the names of the later campsites to demonstrate the great size of the well. Bekhor Shor interprets Nahaliel as a "mighty stream" that issued from the well, Bamot, "to the heights" where the stream of water flowed uphill. Rashi offers a different account of how the water followed the Israelites after they left B'er, the well, itself. He emphasizes the efforts of the leaders. He states that each tribal leader "would take his staff and drag it on the ground towards his own division and his own camp. The water of the well would follow these marks and flow to the campsite of each tribe."

The Israelites continues their journeying, evidently with adequate water supplies, and things are much smoother after the song of the well: successful battles against enemy kingdoms, the establishment of settlements, up to the end of the parashah.

The well at the parashah's end links up with the laws of the red heifer at its opening,. Water is literally a matter of life and death: through the red heifer, it separates the realm of the living and the dead; at Meribah and at the well, it sustains those who wander the barren deserts.

The parashah explores the most basic vulnerabilities of the human body. It opens with the horror of defilement, the intolerable disgust of contamination by the dead, and shows that this uncleanness can only be removed with water. It includes the laments of the Israelites, suffering from lack of water in the desert, fearing a lingering death by thirst.

The parashah shows that these individual human needs--a clean body, a quenched thirst-- can only be addressed by a community, working as a whole, accepting the order that God has created. Water is the one substance that can transmit purification to cleanse someone who has experienced the ultimate defilement, physical contact with the dead. But several people must work together for it to accomplish this end: a leader, a priest, to slaughter the red heifer, and others, commoners, to burn it and transport the ashes and mix them with the flowing water.

The well in the song, too, is a point of community and unity: the people singing, celebrating the digging of the leaders, following the generosity that God provides. The poem, in its dense imagery, evokes this unity. The "well, that captains dug, the people's nobles delved it, with a scepter, with a walking stick."

The song references the nobles and the captains through the signs of their leadership, the scepters and their elaborate staffs. These signs become tools: it does not matter much whether the leaders actually used them to dig, or whether they held them to direct commoners, and perhaps slaves, to dig.

In this way, the song offers a rebuke to Moses. His link to water was also through his rod, but it served as a sign of his lapse of leadership, his failure to link the people and God. The parashah shows thirst as a source of rebellion, and as a source of war too, since the King of Edom does not trust Moses' assurance that the Israelites will not steal water from their wells.

This parashah opens and closes with water as a central element of unity and well-being. It shows water as a key to purification and to celebration.

Perhaps this is the role that God had intended for water all along. Water appears at the very beginning of the first chapter of Bereshit [Genesis], as creation starts. The first verse tells us

that God created the heaven and earth. In the second verse, we hear that God's spirit, or breath, hovered over the face of the waters. This verb appears only once again, in Devarim [Deuteronomy], describing an eagle hovering protectively over its young. We can imagine that God sees the water responding: its surface is ruffled by the divine breath, waves travel out in expanding circles, and then gradually the water quiets, and becomes completely still once again. Other, harder substances might not respond at all to a breath; others, like dust or sand, would simply be scattered or displaced. But water reacts and then returns to itself. Perhaps it is this responsiveness of water that encouraged God to go ahead with the plan to create the universe. Perhaps this responsiveness gave God the assurance he needed to undertake his next act, the uttering of the first words of all time, y'hee or, let there be light.

In the last verses of this chapter, God creates humans, and once again God's spirit, or breath, appears, as God speaks to the first man and woman, blessing them and commanding them to multiply, and offering them the world. We can imagine here as well that God sees the humans responding, perhaps in a gesture, or some inner shift visible only to God, or some word unrecorded in this book. Animals would not comprehend the divine voice, and angels would attend to it automatically, but humans can choose to obey. Perhaps it is this responsiveness of humans that encouraged God with his plan to limit creation to six days. Perhaps this responsiveness gave God the assurance he needed to review creation, and to recognize it not merely as good, but as very good, indeed as complete. He began with water, he ended with us.

Our parashah shows us something more about water and about us. It demonstrates the interplay of the individual and the community, of the human and the divine. It shows that these individual needs—to be cleansed with water, to slake thirst—can only be met by a community within God's universe, a community of responsible leaders and of active participants.

I could offer a number of thoughts about present-day leaders, about their uses and misuses of their signs of office. I could offer thoughts as well about the thirst that seems to worry so many people these days. I could speak as well about the fears of defilement that echo through our society. But it's Shabbat. I'd rather think about creation, about the unique place that our

tradition assigns to us humans, and about our forebear's deep appreciation for water. Our parashah records a moment of joyous singing at God's beneficence, of appreciation for the wise people in the community. Let us be grateful for such moments. And let us trust that there will be more. Shabbat shalom.

Parasha Chukkat

9 July 2022

2593 words -199 = 2394

The scene that I would like to focus on in this short, jam-packed parasha is a familiar one: the Israelites are complaining once again that they will die of thirst in the desert, Moses strikes a rock to provide them with water, and then God tells him that because of this act, he will not enter the Promised Land.

This scene is widely taken to have a direct explanation: God directed Moses to speak to the rock. But since Moses struck the rock instead, he suggested that it was his own power, rather than God's, that brought the thirst-quenching water.

This account fits in with a stance that we contemporary Jews can take, when we are confronted with the archaic nature of our sacred texts: we can find philosophical and moral elements to affirm. It seems better to have a deity who remains invisible and who acts through words, closer to a thought-realm, than a deity who relies on objects, as if God were a conjurer and Moses his apprentice. We tell our children, "Use your words," and we'd like Moses to do that, too.

But I would like to embrace the archaic nature of the texts, and to consider the objects, one by one~~, rather than relegating them to an inferior realm (8 words).~~ Our texts offer us a view, not of a universe of particles and atoms that emerged from a Big Bang, but of a cosmos with many kinds of things, each fashioned carefully, each endowed with specific properties and meanings. I'm fascinated with this stuff, and I'm fascinated with this staff.

The staff of Moses is the second in the Torah, preceded by only one. Back in Vayeshev, a young widow, Tamar, is concerned that she will remain childless, because the levirate marriage thing hasn't been working out for her: What could she do, to receive seed from the proper clan? She disguised herself as a prostitute and sat by the side of the road. Along comes her father-in-law Judah, who's ready to hire her. She's not satisfied with his promise of sending a kid in the future. She requests a pledge, an עֵרָבוֹן, a word that appears only one other time in the Tanakh, in one of Job's laments. He asks her what pledge she would like, she says, "your seal-and-cord, and the staff in your hand."

So מַטֶּה staff first appears in the Torah in the words of a woman dressed as a prostitute, negotiating with a client. But she is very astute. She has picked up on attributes of staffs that can give us insight into Moses' staff as well.

I had wondered why Tamar didn't just ask for the cord-and-signet. These were a kind of personal ID, the Bronze Age equivalent of a driver's license. What else would be necessary? Some commentators suggest that these items were easier to give than his garments would have been, or that his lust was so great that he was willing to give her several items. Nahmanides distinguishes the staff from the other two; his somewhat obscure text is generally taken to mean that he sees the staff as a symbol of authority. This interpretation aligns with Tamar's terse request: asking first for the signet-and-cord, and then adding the staff, and finally mentioning in your hands.

After Judah leaves, Tamar returns to her attire as a proper widow. She is soon visibly pregnant. Judah is told that she had been whoring around, and he condemns her to death by burning. She shows him the

objects and asks him, "Recognize, pray, whose are this seal-and-cord and this staff?" He spares her life. Her deft bargaining allows her to become the founding mother of the lineage of Judah. Tamar understood the visual power of staffs, their ability to establish meaning. And she notes that men carry them around in their hands.

The staff of Moses also makes it first appearance in dialogue, in the middle of a scene rather than in the beginning. In Shmot, with Moses in exile from Egypt, God calls to him from the burning bush and tells him to lead the Jewish people out of slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land. Moses tells God that the task is too hard, the Jewish people won't obey him. God asks Moses, "What is that in your hand?" Moses says, "A staff." God tells Moses to fling it to the ground, which he does; it became a snake, frightening Moses. God tells Moses to reach out his hand and grasp it, which he does; it becomes a staff once again. God explains that this will be an **אות** , a sign.

We see a great deal in Moses' first conversation with God, Moses shows his propensity to disagree and debate, but also his willingness to execute divine commands in detail. And we see that the staff is a major presence at the very start of what will be a long sequence of conversations between God and Moses.

The staff keeps turning up in Exodus. When Moses sets off on his mission from exile, we hear that he "returned to the land of Egypt, and [he] took God's staff in his hand." ~~(Exodus 4:20)~~ In Egypt, there is the scene with Pharaoh and his magicians. God tells Moses and Aaron that Pharaoh might want a **מוֹפֵת**, a portent. This time it's Aaron who flings down his staff, following directions from God relayed by Moses, and it

turns into a snake. The magicians also succeed in turning their staffs into snakes, only to have them eaten by Aaron's.

The staff is the instrument of six of the ten plagues: turning the Nile into blood, frogs, lice, thunder and hail, locusts and the darkness over the earth. In each case gives an instruction to do something specific with the staff, held in the hand, striking something or stretching it somewhere. ~~Striking something—the Nile, dust on the earth with the staff or to stretch it over some portion of Egypt, waters or land or the heavens.25 words~~ For the first three of these plagues, the lesser ones, God directs Moses to tell Aaron to use the staff; the last three are carried out directly by Moses.

At the Red Sea, God tell Moses to raise his staff and stretch out his hand over the sea and split it apart. A few verses later, Moses' outstretched hand, presumably bearing the staff, brings the waters back to drown the Egyptians.

The staff appears two more times, towards the end of this parasha. The Jewish people, in the desert, complain of the lack of water. God tells Moses to take "the staff with which you struck the Nile take in your hand," to go to Horeb and to strike the rock, so water will come out; the Torah tells us "and thus did Moises do before the eyes of Israel's elders," underscoring the importance of the staff as a visible object.

Immediately after this scene comes the battle of Rephidim against the Amalekites. Moses prepares, saying, "I shall take my station on the hilltop, with the staff of God in my hand." We have then the cinematic images of Moses extending both his arms so that the Jewish people would prevail; when he lowered them, the Amalekites prevailed. His

hands need propping up, first by rocks and then by his companions. We see again the link of the staff, the hand and the witnesses, though this is the only time Moses himself uses the phrase "the staff of God" and the only time he uses the staff without a direct command from God.

~~And then staffs disappear for a while though the word מַטֶּה, in its other meaning of tribe, is used frequently in the long censuses. I see this as a close analogy of the English word branch, which can either be a piece of a tree or a portion of a family~~ ~~There is a single use of the word in the Tochecha, the curses, in Bekuchotai, the book of Vayikra, where God lists the punishments that await the Jewish people if they fail in their worship and other acts. God threatens to break "your staff of bread," condemning the rebellious Jewish people to hunger so severe that, a few verses later, they will consume the flesh of their own children. This is the first appearance of this metaphor of bread as a staff, taken up also in Ezekiel; Rashi comments that bread props up life [145 words]~~

Staffs show up again in Bamidbar, when they help restore order after the rebellion of Korach ~~and his followers who take on a priestly role, offering incense on their own. The revellion ends with the earth opening to swallow up rebels and another 250 being destroyed by fire. Staffs play a major role in restoring order to the Jewish people. [44 words]~~ We get our only scene with multiple staffs. God commands that each of the twelve tribes provide a staff with the chief's name written on it. Aaron's name is placed on the staff for the house of Levi. On a divine command, the staffs are brought before the Ark of the Covenant. The next day, Aaron's staff had flowered and borne fruit. God announces that Aaron's staff will be stored near the Ark as a sign for

rebels, and then delivers a long address to Aaron alone and a shorter one to Moses.

After a chapter with the confusing laws of the red heifer and the single verse announcing Miriam's death and burial, we return to the people complaining of thirst. Perhaps concerned about Moses' using the staff on his own at Rephidim, God goes back to precise directions. "Take the staff and assemble the community, you and Aaron your brother, and you shall speak to the rock before their eyes, and it will yield its water, and I shall bring forth water for them from the rock and give drink to the community and to its beasts. And Moses took that staff from before the Lord as the Lord had charged." ~~(Several commentators note that this was the staff stored in front of the ark.) 14 words~~ Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly in front of the rock, and then Moses shifts off script., He chastises the crowd. Continuing in improv mode, Moses raises his hand, strikes the rock twice with his staff, and abundant water comes out.

And then immediately comes God's rebuke: "Inasmuch as you did not trust me to sanctify me before the eyes of the Israelites, even so you shall not bring this assembly to the land that I have given to them." A real irony here: Moses' life was marked by its beginning in a river, his floating in the cradle in the Nile, and now its ending will also be marked by a river, the Jordan that he is forbidden to cross. A second irony: Moses' exclusion came from a single act of disobedience involving a part of a tree—a staff, just as the expulsion from the Garden of Eden came from Adam and Eve's single offence, disobeying a command about a part of another tree—the fruit.

I think that it's understandable that Moses would be feeling strong, with the staff in his hand. It has been with Moses for a long time, ever since the burning bush. It's been a terrific instrument, astounding the Pharoah and his magicians, creating most of the plagues, dividing the Red Sea, and winning a battle.

But he might have been thinking that things weren't going so well for him. His brother Aaron, who only had only been allowed to use the staff for the earlier, lesser plagues, and that under Moses' direction, is now getting major billing, with his name inscribed on the staff, the staff being favored with flowers and fruit, and then stored at the ark. And his sister Miriam has just died. Along comes more grumbling, the threat of another rebellion. Too much stress. He starts to follow the precise instructions God gave him, but then, in frustration, he strikes the rock, falling back on the previous occasion he used the staff to provide water. A definite lapse, though an understandable one.

Perhaps neither God nor Moses were at their best in this scene. It does seem excessive to block Moses from entering the Promised Land, just for this one slip. That's harsh, even from someone as inclined as God is to micromanage.

God's perspective could be easier for us to understand if we give the staff a more central position in the story, perhaps as God did. God mentions specifically "you did not trust me to sanctify me before the eyes of the Israelites." The eyes are important: we've heard the importance of the staff as a visible sign that convinces people, and we've heard as well that its association with hands, marking the authority of specific men—qualities that Tamar recognized, and that she used to save her life and continue her family line.

At this moment, Moses may have forgotten these qualities. He should have understood that the staff was not his alone to wield as he wished. It was an emblem of authority bestowed upon a man whom God chose, not a light saber or a magic want to do tricks with.

Moses continues in the Torah till the very end. But two things change: the conversations with God quickly abate (God responds to Moses' query about the daughters of Zelophehad, and when Moses asks God to provide a new leader, God indicates Joshua).Moses continue to receive instructions after these two brief exchanges, but Moses' dialogues with God are over. And likewise his staff does not make a reappearance, nor is it transferred to Joshua.

An entire period has closed. There are later references to staffs in the Tanakh, where they serve as a metaphor in the discourses of prophets and poets, but there are no more men who hold staffs in their hand and who converse with God.

A staff so powerful stimulates the imagination. It provided our forebears with rich materials. Pirkei Avot includes it among the 10 miraculous objects created on the twilight of the sixth day. Other sources trace its history, even equating it with the staff that Judah gave to Tamar as a pledge. Some say that it was returned to the ark, after Moses struck the rock, and remained there until King Josiah hid it, anticipating the defeat of Israel; the Messiah will bring it back to earth.

The Tanakh contains a number of words other than מַטֶּה for long pieces of wood that confer authority, much as English has words like rod, pole and stick as well as staff. These include terms often rendered as staff in English translations: the instructions in Exodus for the first seder ("And thus shall you eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and

your staff in your hand.") and the words in the Psalm 23 we know as rod and staff; and many more. Perhaps I will discuss those another time: the מַטֶּה on its own is more than enough for a dvar torah.

We can see Moses as the Torah displays him, to our generation as to the generations of his time, staff in hand. And if we seek a fuller understanding of him, and the scene at the rock, and perhaps even God, we can attend to the object he held as well.

This parasha Chukat contains an important scene, a critical point in the life of Moses and in the travels of the Israelites from the crossing of the Red Sea out of Egypt to the crossing of the Jordan River into the promised land. It's a familiar story: the Israelites on their long journey are grumbling once again, the complaint that every parent has heard on long car rides, "why did you have to take us on this stupid trip?" This time, they are hungry—or at least not satisfied with the food that they are getting on this long trip—and they seem thirsty as well, the Torah tells us that there was no water for the community, and they disputed with Moses. God tells Moses what to do: take the staff, and speak to rock. It will produce a lot of water, enough for the people and for their animals as well. Judy and I never had a dog that we brought along on car trips, so I can't say that I have a personal memory of our kids complaining on behalf of the family pet, but I can well imagine that they would have, if we had had a dog to bring.

Moses asks the assembled people whether he and Aaron should bring water out of the rock, but before they can answer, he strikes the rock with his staff. Lots of water comes out, and everyone, people and animals, has water to drink. God was quite displeased with the way that these events unfolded. He tells Moses, I'm quoting Robert Alter's translation here, "Inasmuch as you did not trust me to sanctify me before the eyes of the Israelites, even so you shall not bring this assembly to the land that I have given them." The narrator adds one more sentence to wrap the story up, in the classical fashion in which a name is bestowed on a place: These are the waters of Meribah, where the Israelites disputed with the Lord, and He was sanctified through them.

I'd like to examine the role of the water in this story, even though attention has generally been directed to other puzzling questions. There's the issue of what Moses did to offend God so much. How had Moses failed to sanctify God? For many commentators, it was Moses' failure to speak. If he had commanded the rock to release water, as God had asked him to, the miraculous nature of the event would have been evident. But by striking the rock, Moses might have been suggesting that it was his power that produced the water, and that would certainly count as a failure to sanctify God. For those who value prayer and speech, this argument is appealing. For other commentators, it was Moses' speaking at another point that was the issue: his brief extemporaneous speech to the Israelites, in which, before striking the rock, he said, "Listen, pray, rebels! Shall we bring forth water for you from this rock?" He is clearly suggesting that he and Aaron will be the ones to produce the water, and that, too, could count as a failure to sanctify God. Besides which, God rarely hesitates to tell Moses what to tell the Israelites. God is like one of those relatives who never wants to make a phone call on his own, but is always telling you what to say...and then if you come up with something on your own to say, it's never quite right.

We can gain some insight from the earlier scenes in the Torah when we've got thirsty Israelites and Moses hitting a rock with his staff. They occur much earlier in the Torah, right after crossing the Red Sea. In fact it's about 38 years that separate the two events, the first occurring soon after leaving Egypt, the second not much before crossing into the promised land.

I think that when we look back to the Israelites' first months in the desert, we think of the making of the golden calf as the strongest indication of the pull back to the familiarity of Egypt, the yearning for an idol. But it's worth looking at the thirst and hunger when they set out into the desert. For the first three

days, the Israelites relied on the water that they carried with them in containers, not finding any water at all. Though they did come to water sources, some of them abundant, they made a big fuss when they arrived a spring of water that was bitter, not stopping to think that it could be made fresh and drinkable. And they retained their strong dislike of dry camps. I see this as the tug that pulls them back towards Egypt. You'd think that freedom would be precious to them, and that they would trust the pillars of fire and cloud to guide them to places where their needs would be met. But no, they freak out if they don't have the wells and streams that are like the ones they remember. In Egypt, the Nile was always present, and access to water was not an issue. And food is an issue as well: according to Rashi, they panic at the moment that they run out of the bread that they carried from Egypt, and are not assuaged till God gives them manna, and sends quail as well since they are complaining about missing the meat that ate in Egypt.

These two concerns, thirst and hunger, remain closely tied. In the very next sentence in Shmot that follows the receiving of manna, the Israelites come to another dry camp, in a place called Rephidim, and the incident occurs that is very similar to the one in today's parasha, with all the same components, Israelites, God, Moses, staff, rock, water.

The Torah has similar phrasing for this first incident as for the second, we are told that there was no water for the people, and the identical verb, the people disputed with Moses. This dry camp really gets to the people, even though it seems to me that after a month and a half of alternating dry camps and camps with springs, they would have settled into the rhythms of desert travel. They seem more riled up this first time—Moses is afraid that they will stone him—and they speak more elaborately as well, saying, "Why is it you brought us up from Egypt to bring death on me and my children and my livestock by thirst?" God tells Moses to take his staff and strike the rock. Moses follows God's instructions. We have to imagine that the water did come out, since the narrator doesn't report that directly. But we do hear that this place back in Shmot was called Massah and Meribah, testing and dispute. This is the same Meribah as we have in the story in today's parashah, further cementing the relation between the two.

This first Meribah is instructive, since God told Moses to strike the rock with his staff. All very peculiar, if you ask me. I also can't quite figure out why God asks Moses to take his staff in this week's parshah, if it wasn't to hit the rock. Every other time that God tells Moses to take his staff, it's to perform an action with the staff, a miracle or something. God asks Moses to gather the Israelites on five other occasions in the Torah in addition to the one today, and in none of them does God tell Moses to take his staff to gather them. Perhaps God was testing Moses. We hear so often that Moses did exactly as God told him to, so holding the familiar staff that Moses had used for so many miracles was just a challenge, to see whether Moses would only speak rather than returning once again to striking the rock.

I think that this all has to do with hunger and thirst, the sensations that are so difficult for the Israelites that they voice regret at having left Egypt. In the first instance, the people aren't hungry at all, they've just started receiving manna. But they are thirsty, the only appearance of the word tsame in the Torah except for one additional occurrence in the curses late in Dvarim. The Hebrew word tsame seems to me stronger than the English thirst, since it's linked with tsom, fast, suggesting that the sensation lasts for a while, rather than possibly being transitory, and that lack of water is total, rather than partial. And it is a

serious thirst, they fear death, for themselves, their children and their animals. Perhaps it's an unnecessary fear—it seems unlikely to me that the God who has just provided them with manna would let them die of thirst—but it is an acute fear.

How was the second Meribah, the second grumbling over the lack of water, different from the first? Bear in mind that the people have had decades of wandering in the desert, this is essentially a new generation, formed in the desert. And yet still they tied to the habits of Egypt, to their recollections of the comforts of the Egypt rather than the physical and spiritual slavery. They are unhappy about the kind of food, rather than its availability. They've had enough manna, and instead they miss the food in Egypt ,they mention the grain, the figs, the grapes and the pomegranates. The grain and the fruits are all grown with irrigation water from the Nile, the river that is always present. And their need for water is lesser this second time as well. The people are registering discontent about the scarcity of water, rather than fear of death as they did the first time. They are not even described as thirsty. Moreover, the specific form of the verb points to the greediness of the Israelites. Nehama Leibowitz cites Cassuto as suggesting there was not an "actual lack of water, which is, indeed, the greatest of misfortunes, but illusory need." She quotes the 19th century commentary Haketav VehaKabbalah of Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg. He emphasizes the use of the infinitive, lishtot, rather than the gerund, sh'tiya, and takes it to mean that the people wanted water "to keep on drinking from, the implication is that they had not enough for a continuous supply, but if they had wanted to ration their requirements, they would have had enough." He takes this to mean that they were not satisfied with the water that they had in their vessels, the jugs or pots, or perhaps water-skins like the one Hagar relied on in the desert.

What can we learn from the Israelites' exaggerated yearnings for water, after 38 years of psychotherapy, oops I mean wandering in the desert? They help me understand why God placed so much emphasis on Moses' precise obedience to his commands, and why Moses' small deviations were enough to keep him out of the promised land. It isn't just some semiotic point about words and objects, or God's displeasure at Moses' presumption. God recognized the dangers of thirst, real or imagined. Even after the resolution of the spies, two parashas back, the Israelites remain fearful, untrusting. They needed another miracle, and Moses didn't help show it quite the way God wanted.

Though there is some later grumbling in our parasha about manna and water, enough for God to send snakes to punish the Israelites, there is also trust on their part, and gratitude. The Israelites offer to pass through the kingdoms of Edom and Amor without even taking water from their wells. And at another point they celebrate a well with a song, praising the leaders for using their staffs to dig the well. They really are getting ready to enter the promised land, the place where they will rely, not on the Nile as in Egypt, not from scattered oases as in the desert, but from the rain, the sign of God's favor and of the ongoing bond between God and the people.

In what ways are we like the Israelites, fearing that we will lack water, failing to trust that our needs will be met? What thirsts do we have that tie us to former enslavement? I have seen thirsts around me this summer: grumblings about hot subway platforms, about imperfect vacations, about the wrong kinds of stores opening on Broadway. And, more deeply, I've seen people who are losing the belief that their

actions matter, in a world where expressions of hatred and acts of violence occur with distressing frequency.

We can learn that manna will nourish us, even if we don't have figs and pomegranates at every moment. And we can trust that our water containers not be empty, even if there is not a spring at every turn in the path. I hope that our grumblings do not slow our journey towards a better world. Let our thirst be for peace and justice. Shabbat shalom.

Dvar Torah on Parsha Pinchas

Minyan Maat

July 14, 2001

Having two daughters, it is no wonder that I have always been fascinated by the story of Zelophehad's daughters. In fact, I found in my computer a dvar torah, which I gave here in 1989. Their story is rather simple. The daughters approach Moses and Eleazar saying that since their father did not commit the sin of Korah; and since he died of his own sin (presumably a less egregious one), his name should not be done away with just because he has no sons. Their cause is that since their father died without any son they should have the right to the possession of his inheritance in order to preserve his name. God agrees that their request, in Rashi's parlance, was just and that if a man has no brothers, his inheritance shall pass to the next kin, i.e., even if the kin be women.

On the surface this seems like a most modern egalitarian concept. We read the order of inheritance if a man were to die: to the son, to the daughter, his brothers, his father's brothers, some other next of kin. The rabbis had a more detailed line of hereditary succession: (1) the sons and their descendants (2) the daughters and their descendants (3) the father (4) brothers and their descendants (5) sisters and their descendants (6) the father's father (7) the father's brothers and their descendants (8) the father's sisters and their descendants (9) the father's father; and so on. (This is from Maimonides.)

Do you notice who is missing from this long list?

Where is the mother and her kin?

We will shortly learn at the very end of Bamidbar, in Chapter 36, that these very daughters will have to marry within their tribe in order that the land stay within the tribe. Zelophehad's daughters came to marry their father's brother's sons. From this perspective, the daughters inherit their father's land as custodians for the men who they will eventually marry and the sons they will bear. As long as they do not marry they control the land. Once they marry they lose control. They essentially inherit for the benefit of the father's grandchildren.

The JPS commentary on "The Inheritance Rights of Daughters" gives us fascinating data, which adds to the puzzle of the Israelite inheritance system as it concerned inheritance by daughters. The editor states that the Israelite practice contrasted sharply with the neighboring inheritance laws, which allowed a daughter to inherit, such as the ancient Sumerian law (occurring a millennium before the writings which we read about). The editors suggest that the patrilineal inheritance in the Bible (with the exception delineated in this parsha—and then only temporarily) was a result of the clan makeup of the community, so that land had to remain within the clan's control. The surrounding communities, which allowed inheritance by daughters, were more urbanized and thus less concerned with clannish divisions.

The JPS notes that a profound question remains. "What happened in post-biblical times, when the clan structure of Israel had completely disintegrated?" The logic for the law was

eliminated but it remained a divine decree to be followed. The JPS notes a variety of examples that demonstrate the rabbis' discomfort and embarrassment with this law. Yet there is no good explanation as to why it continued.

I will provide a psychological hypothesis which, perhaps those who are well-versed in biblical law, rabbinic law, and the history of the period can see if it is useful.

My main idea comes from the absence of the mother from the long list of the order of inheritance. Does the problem relate to mothers and motherhood?

Consider the following narrative written in the author's voice from 1982 discussing the feelings generated by an enforced bed rest during the last trimester of pregnancy.

"I wouldn't have minded putting my career second for a bit. What I minded was putting it on the shelf altogether. And that's what it looked like. At the college my classes had been taken over and my name had been taken off my office door."

"A funny thing happens when someone gets pregnant, even before she has her child. In the eyes of many, she becomes transformed into an immediate member of the Joyful Madonna Brigade, and other aspects of her being seem, in others' eyes, to fade or become irrelevant."

"To be sure, the women's movement has changed our understanding of family life, including having children. 'Nurturant' has replaced 'maternal,' and 'parenting' has replaced 'mothering,' leaving men a lot more room for participation.....But I still worry. Because, despite the social changes, the cultural expectations of fathers are not at all what they are of mothers."

To paraphrase from the subtitle of a recent book, "The Price of Motherhood," "Why is the most important job in the world still the least valued?"

Why has motherhood been both such a valorized state as well as a state to be degraded by both men and women? We, at the beginning of the third millennium forget that pregnancy and childbirth were extremely dangerous physical activities until very, very recently. On the one hand ancient man must have marveled at the prowess of women—with their abilities to generate and nurture new life. On the other hand, the dangers of pregnancy and childbirth were certainly not lost on men, women, or children. From that perspective—Eve's punishment for her sin—to endure the pains and dangers of childbirth—are certainly consistent with the experiences of everyday life.

Eve's words in a midrash in Ginzberg are noteworthy.

"Upon me God pronounced this sentence: 'Thou shalt suffer anguish in childbirth and grievous torture. In sorrow shalt thou bring forth children, and in the hour of travail, when thou art near to lose thy life, thou wilt confess and cry, 'Lord, Lord, save me this

time, and I will never again indulge in carnal pleasure,' and yet thy desire shall ever and ever be unto thy husband."

In other words, once the woman chooses to marry or is forced to marry she becomes the vessel for the procreation of future generations, despite the real dangers to her life. Is it any wonder that some early psychoanalysts wrote that normal women are masochistic? Who but a masochist or a slave would endure the dangers that Eve, our foremother, and her daughters from future generations, were forced to endure?

The Vestal Virgins of ancient Rome tended the temple of Vesta and participated in various religious rites in ancient Rome. Sarah Pomeroy writes how, "in some respects they were the most emancipated women in Rome." For example, "they were the only women permitted to drive through the city of Rome in a carpetum, a two-wheeled wagon, which conferred high status on its occupant." "Despite the privileges, candidates for the priesthood became increasingly difficult to find. Vestals were traditionally recruited from the upper classes." Interestingly enough, one of the reasons upper class families stopped giving their daughters to the temples was a result of their small families and a daughter might make the difference between the survival or extinction of a family line. Augustus, in order to increase the birth rate, exempted the father of three children from the obligation of offering a daughter to become a Vestal Virgin.

The daughters of Zelophephad were valorized in the midrash for their virginity. Like Moses who stayed away from his wife, they did not marry until after 40 years—a similar

period of time (30 years for the Vestals)—that the Vestals remained virgins before their marriage. Clearly during that long period in the prime life, a woman's life can be more like the man's, without being exposed to the dangers of childbirth. It is only during the modern period, and not just because of our psychological advancement, but because of our phenomenal progress in health science, that we have been blessed so that women can be both mothers as well as professionals. Yet, we also learn from these stories from long ago, that the burdens of child-birth are necessary for the survival of our kinfolk—as we, as human beings—want to insure that our name, that is, our blood line survive. In that sense—in the survival of our name, meaning the survival of our deeds—do we come close to continue to exist, even when our bodies depart from the earth.

We are all (both men and women) like Zelophephad's daughters—wanting to preserve our fore-bearer's names and good deeds and wishing that those who will follow us will remember ours. When we remembered Baruch Bokser on his yartzeit this week and when our thoughts are with Billie Meyers as he remembers his mother during his shivah, we are participating in rituals so that all of us in the community continue to survive.

Shabat Shalom

Leon Hoffman

Parshat Pinchas, July 2017

Shabbat shalom—or gut shabbos, as the case may be.

These days, any responsible darshan who talks about parshat Pinchas must at least mention the daughters of Tz'lafchad. Well, I'd like to think I'm a responsible person—and, in fact, I think the episode of the daughters is extremely important.

But, with apologies if I'm disappointing the kahal, that was my mention. I have something else on my mind. I'd like to tell you why.

A few weeks ago, while we were davvening Musaf, I got to thinking—which is arguably something to avoid. Most of the time, the comfortable way to persist in religious observance is to do it the way you brush your teeth. But, as it happened, I slipped and started to reflect on the odd circumstance tht I was praying for the resumption of animal sacrifice. Even more strange: I was reciting these prayers on the assumption that my words would substitute for a ritually slaughtered animal.

Now, we have just listened to a reading of the sacrificial schedule as it's given in Pinchas, and in a few minutes we'll be starting Musaf. So I thought this would be a good moment, right in the middle, to talk about the notion that we can use words in place of sacrificial beasts. As I hope to show, this idea has consequences.

One of the most entertaining of them is the implication that words must somehow be living creatures. Some can be domesticated, and some can't, but they all have appetites of their own and a capacity for self-directed movement. If a word can substitute for an animal, then it's the sort of thing that can jump a fence and get into the corn. Now

that I've reached a certain age, the little critters have started to hide in the underbrush and won't come out when I call.

But here's the most important implication. When we offer prayers to God, in place of sacrifices, we must make sure that we have drained the blood out of our words.

Now, I can't learn this from Pinchas, even though this is where God commands the schedule of required sacrifices, because the parsha says nothing about procedure. But if I go back 17 parshas to Vayikra, I can find out a little about how the priests were supposed to perform the ritual. And it's very clear: blood is not to be offered on the altar. Blood plays a big, complicated role in the proceedings—depending on the circumstances it might be dashed around the altar, or sprinkled here and there—but the blood must be drained out of the animal. If you don't drain the blood, you can't burn the meat and fat, and you won't send up a pleasing odor to God.

As it was with the sheep and goats and rams and small birds, so must it be with our words. To send them up to God, we first have to drain them of blood.

Can they really need to be drained? I would say yes, and too often.

Sometimes the blood is right on the surface. Here, for example, is a future president of the United States speaking about a broadcaster: "You could see there was blood coming out of her eyes. Blood coming out of her wherever." And here is that same man, now installed as the president, speaking about another broadcaster: "She was bleeding badly from a face-lift."

Well, that's too easy. Let's look instead at more painful examples, where the language calls for blood to be shed. Many of us will immediately think of the instances of blood libel against Jews, or the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, or Nazi propaganda. But

closer to home—by "home," I mean Chicago—we've heard the cries of lynch mobs, which in 1919 reached as far north as the Lake Michigan beach. If you want to think about how the use of words full of bloody possibilities can become an everyday reality, too common even to be noticed, remember the episode in the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* where Malcolm opens a dictionary and reads all the ugly, demeaning connotations that adhere to the word "black," and therefore cling to him personally. Just an ordinary column of type in Merriam-Webster, about a one-syllable word, but it's soaked in blood.

Of course, Jews generally refrain from using violent language, especially against one another—except, for example, in the weeks leading up to the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin.

I have dipped a toe far enough into the Chofetz Chaim to have learned that this issue of Jewish speech about other Jews is the principal concern of the rules of sh'mirat lashon, guarding the tongue. Jewish speech about non-Jews, not so much. But there is good reason to think that we are enjoined from defaming anybody. If you want the opinion of an authority, here's the Vilna Gaon, who I hope is good enough: "No word is lost, for all is recorded. Angels are sent to every person to note each word, and they never part from him. As it is said in Kohelet, 'For the bird of the sky transmits the voice and the accompanying angel testifies.'"

I take this to mean that our Musaf prayers are a special instance of a general case. Angels record everything we speak, to everybody, which means that *all* blood has to be drained from *all* our words.

The horror of defamatory speech—which so quickly and easily slides into violent speech—how do I know that it's crucial in Pinchas? The answer lies in the most affecting

narrative moment in the parsha. God tells Moshe to look at the promised land and then prepare to die, "ka-asher m'ritem pi b'midbar Tzin." Because, in the desert of Tzin, you rebelled against My commandment—my spoken word, literally *my mouth*—when instead you were supposed to sanctify me before the people.

God commands through words. Moshe was supposed to sanctify God before the people through words. But, instead, Moshe lashed out at the people in an angry speech, after which, as if to set loose the violence pent up in his words, he struck the rock. So he disqualified himself from entering the land. I have to ask: if a violent speech act could bring down Moshe, how much less can any of *us* afford to have blood in our words? And if a slight to the reputation can be so hurtful to the all-powerful creator of the universe, how much more must we be sensitive to the impact of our words on mere humans?

Think for a moment what our world would be like, if we simply followed the basic maternal precept, "If you can't say something nice about a person, don't say anything"? Actually, that would be a problem. We wouldn't have the novels of Jane Austen, let alone Bellow and Roth. And I would lose the portion of my income I derive from reviewing movies. For me, loshon hora isn't just a professional hazard, it's a stock in trade. Would you like to hear some good loshon hora from my reviews?

You're supposed to say, "No! Don't give us any loshon hora!"

So there's the catch. We enjoy loshon hora. It's delicious. We enjoy it so much that a man can even be elected president by exploiting it and encouraging it. I doubt I have to say anything about the corrosive effect in the larger society. But let me return to the subject of Jews talking about other Jews, and say something about our own community.

The great thing about this minyan is that we're in each other's business all the time—at our smachot, during our times of mourning, when we're trying to decide between Verizon FiOS and Spectrum. And the bad thing about the minyan is that we're in each other's business all the time. The opportunity for gossip is always there, and it's fun. The risk of causing embarrassment, or nursing a grudge, or doing harm to another, is always there, too. And here's the trickiest part. We all think that when we criticize, or mock, or pass along something we've heard, we're doing good in some way—whether it's by amusing someone, or clearing the air, or just speaking in a way that we judge, in our omniscience, to be honest.

Do I have any advice to give on the subject? As I said, it's not really my place. I'm up here as a professional peddler of loshon hora—and, on top of that, I am as a matter of principle as close to a free-speech absolutist as you can find outside the pages of the Marquis de Sade. But I think I can go so far as to say that I hope everyone in our community will think a little before yielding to the temptation to derogate another minyan member, or repeat a juicy piece of information that might not be quite right.

And if it seems as if that kind of all-purpose guarding of the tongue might be too difficult to maintain day in and day out, maybe we can at least get in a little practice during the special time of Musaf. Just ten minutes a week. Seven, if Seth is leading the davvening. For that brief time, why not clear our minds of bad habits: the running arguments we imagine conducting with other people, the memories of the slights we feel we need to redress, the grievances we want to tell somebody about? Let's temporarily let go of the anger and, yes, the violence that's always ready to start shouting in our interior monologue. Then the words of our prayer will be drained of blood and appropriate for

sacrifice. And then, at the end of the Amidah, we'll be ready to say, "May the words of my lips and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to You."

Shabbat shalom.

Matot-Masei, July 22, 2006

*Note: I delivered this drash after the government of Ehud Olmert chose to expand a conflict against Palestinian forces in Gaza by undertaking military action in southern Lebanon. My remarks criticizing this action were made while the conflict was ongoing. I believe none of my criticisms went beyond the findings of Israel's Wingorad Commissioned, released in April 2007.*

If I were speaking on this shabbat in the best of times, I'd have to give my remarks at least a slight funereal tinge, because the month of Av is approaching. Now, of course, we are not in the best of times. Nevertheless, I will begin on a topic other than the one that is preoccupying all of us. My remarks today actually originate from a private impulse.

Months ago, before this bloodshed started, I decided to speak on this date because it falls between the yahrzeits of my parents. My father died 11 years ago, on the second of Tammuz. My mother, whom many of you knew, died 4 years ago, on the fifth of Av. So, there's your funereal tinge. I promise, I won't devote my whole time to eulogizing my parents—but I do hope this d'var Torah may in some way commemorate my beloved father and my extraordinary mother.

Now, as soon as I thought up those words, I could hear my mother say, "So—*I'm* not beloved?" And I could see my father smile, as he swallowed the thought that *he* was just ordinary. That, he would accept in silence. What I could hear *him* say was, "Tell your mother you love her." I, as usual, was left to splutter "That's not what I meant!"

You see, I've learned that my relationship with my parents hasn't ended, just because they're dead. The conversations have become a little one-sided, I admit, but still, the relationship is ongoing. This is the feeling I want to emphasize today in reading Matot

and Masei—this experience, sometimes for good, sometimes for ill, that something may be over and yet continue.

Now, what do we find in the text that might evoke such an experience? I'm tempted to say, the whole thing.

Let's start with some of the less emotionally charged situations. Last week, when we read Pinchas, we might have thought that Moses had resolved the problems of the daughters of Tzelaph'chad. But the inheritance apparently wasn't settled. The case was closed, but it gets opened again. Lawyers!

Another example. An unmarried woman makes a vow, and her father lets it stand. But later, when she gets married, her husband hears about it, and of course *he* has to have *his* opinion. Men!

Let's move up now to the world-historical level. God says to Moses, "You have one last thing to do, and then you're going to die." So Moses does it—at which point his life is officially over. Yet somehow, for a person with no more obligations, he remains a very busy man. He's got spoils to divide, inheritance rights to legislate, tribes to keep enrolled in the army, borders to set. It's a lot for a man who has supposedly done *the last thing*.

And, as with Moses, so with the tribes. Here, at the end of Bamidbar, we read the complete itinerary of their wanderings. Their trek is over. The exodus is complete—literally complete for the two and a half tribes that want to remain in Gilead. They're ready to drop off the wives and kids, right where they stand.

We might even say that *all* of the Israelites have received their apportioned land, before the end of Masei. Rashi makes a grammatical point to demonstrate that Elazar and

Joshua take title to the land themselves, now, on behalf of the people. So the property rights have effectively been settled. The rest is just details.

Some details. The Exodus is over. The Exodus, as we know, is just beginning.

And what about our own experience of these events, as communal readers of Torah? From B'reshit onward, we have read about the land that the Israelites will inherit. You might say that the entire Torah directs their steps toward the border where they now stand. They're going to stand on it some more, as we read D'varim. And then, when D'varim ends, will they cross over? Actually, no. Because our cycle of reading starts again—the cycle that binds us as a community, and is so integral to our sense of ritual time—and in this cycle, we're like Moses himself. We never get to the Promised Land. We perpetually re-start an imaginative journey we had supposedly finished.

It ends, and it doesn't end. So: I will make myself talk about Israel, Lebanon, Gaza.

First, I need to tell you that Bali and I are close to a wonderful young Israeli woman who lost a cousin this past week in a rocket attack. Earlier in the week, this same young woman almost lost her mother the same way. We have been grieving for our friend. And, speaking just for myself, I will also mention that I have some old emotional ties to Haifa. Like all of you, I am deeply concerned for the people in Israel who have been under attack. And so I ask about my responsibility toward these people—because what we say and do, as a community, does makes a difference.

Am I called on to support the people of Israel in their need for safety and well-being? Yes, absolutely, without reservation. But what if I believe that Israel's chosen policy will *not* promote safety and well-being, for anybody at all? Then, in what I hope is

a disagreement for the sake of heaven, I believe it is my responsibility to dissent—to enter a minority report, perhaps. To remain silent, I think, would be to help continue certain relationships that really ought to end.

Twenty-four years ago, Israel sent troops all the way into Beirut. The goal then, as now, was to stop militants from firing rockets across the border. The goal then, as now, was to smash an armed militia, which was being supplied and supported by an ambitious foreign power. Israel's military action then, as now, was overwhelming. Out of that decisive assault in 1982 rose Hezbollah. It ends, but it doesn't end.

Yet people tell me, in the name of realism, that Israel has no choice. It must demolish civilian infrastructure, uproot populations, bomb refugee convoys. Otherwise, Hezbollah will win. I'm sorry, but I see nothing realistic in this policy. I believe it's more likely that in another twenty-four years, we will be answering to the survivors of Ali Suleiman, Daoud Hazima, Khadija Moussawi and her children Bilal, Talal and Yasmine; Maouffaq Diab; Ahmed and Khairallah Mouawad; Mustafa Jroud and Bushra Shuqr—all of them civilians, all killed in just one village, called Nabi Chit. You see, they, too, had names. And the people they leave behind have memories.

I do not believe that the defense of Israel, in realistic terms, has demanded these deaths. In fact, I don't even believe that the underlying impulse for these strikes is defensive. It is retributive—and that is something we ought to be very careful about. I learned that from my father, and I learn it from Matot-Masei.

My father first. He knew about bloodshed. He'd fought in World War II as a master sergeant in Patton's infantry—but when I was a kid, and full of curiosity, he would never tell me anything about the combat he'd experienced. The only Army story

he would tell dated from immediately after the war, when he was made the occupying officer of a town in Germany. His first language had been Yiddish, you see, and the Army thought that was close enough.

One day, he said, hundreds of displaced persons started coming down the road. They were starving. So my father ordered his troops to give their rations to the DP's. Then he took a couple head of cattle from one of the town's herds, had the regimental butcher slaughter them, and fed his troops with the meat. Soon, into my father's office stormed the town's mayor, who had gotten himself up for the occasion in his high boots. The mayor came in screaming, demanding that my father provide restitution for the cattle. My father's only response was to say, "Listen. We won."

When I was growing up, I assumed the point of this story was to celebrate a moment of triumph. In your face, High-Boots! But sometime in my twenties, I finally understood the point that my father could not state out loud. My hard-knocks father from Chicago's Yiddish West Side, high-school educated, 26 years old, still charged up from house-to-house combat against Germans, newly confronted with the walking skeletons left by the Nazi regime, faced a screaming, imperious German but did not take out his service revolver and shoot him dead. Do you doubt my father could have done it, and gotten away clean? Do you doubt he wanted to? But instead—and this seems to have been the sum of what my father wanted me to know about war—instead he spoke three words. He did not take retribution.

As for what I learn from Matot-Masei: Although some people, I'm sure, will believe that the battle against the Midianites is the most appropriate episode to discuss

this week. I believe we should think more about the cities of refuge, and the laws that restrain revenge killing.

I know, those laws have nothing to do with warfare. But since we, as a community, advertise ourselves as Ansche Chesed, maybe we ought to think more mercifully than is absolutely required, and even speak to others about holding back from revenge. Because, in realistic terms, maybe that is the best course to protect the people of Israel.

My proof text: "For blood befouls the land; and the land cannot be cleansed of the blood that is shed in it, except by the blood of the one who shed it." Which means, in practice, that the land can never get clean.

In the hope that we will stop befouling the land by trying to make it clean—in the conviction that some things should end and *stay* ended—I say to you all, shabbat *shalom*.

1996

I found these last two sedarim of Bamidbar, Matot (tribes) and Mass-e (journeys), very interesting. They provoked thoughts to try to understand the choice of subjects dealt in this section reporting on the eve of the Israelites' ascent onto the promised land. Some issues are as a result of political motives. The names themselves, tribes and journeys, imply the political issues. The recount of the journey from Egypt to the present is a presentation in a summary way of the inevitable march of history, of what has transpired over the previous 40 years with the destiny just ahead. The nation is instructed on how to deal with an enemy, whom to kill, whom to save, how to deal with the booty, all masculine activities as the women are considered part of the booty. This new nation, or rather this group of people or federation of tribes (matot) will shift from a nomadic existence to a sedentary one. The nation has to develop strategies on how to deal with the division of land among the tribes, the creation of the Levites' portion, i. e. how will the people support that group which is an intermediary between the general poupulace and God. Further, the discussion of the development of cities of refuge relates to questions of morality, e.g., which kind of murder is punishable and which not. But basically the issues are substantially political, i.e., how does the polis as a whole deal with competing interests, both from within and without.

There is an interesting, and to me, seemingly incongruous juxtaposition of rules relating to the treatment of women in this section. God commands that the Midianite women who have had relations with men should be killed, for the interest of

preventing immoral behavior by the Israelite men. In terms of Israelite women, in the previous sedra, we were told the story of Zeloph-had's daughters who approached Moses with their cause that since their father died without any son they should have the right to the possession of his inheritance in order to preserve his name. On the surface, the discussions about women seem to refer to issues of general morality. God agrees that their request, in Rashi's parlance, was just and that if a man has no brothers, his inheritance shall pass to the next kin, i.e., even if the kin be women.

The beginning of Matot, however, stresses the opposite view of the role of women in the society, and issues of morality are stressed from the male point of view. The vows taken by a woman are null and void unless her father, and later her husband agree that the vows be allowed. At the end of Bamidbar, there is a very interesting modification of what was considered just in the previous sedra. The sentence begins in a very specific way: "The heads of the fathers of the families of the tribes" (roshei ha-avot lmishpachat bnei Gilead) which descend from Joseph complain that since the daughters of Zelophe-had have permission to inherit, if they were to marry men from another tribe, the land would shift ownership since the inheritance proceeds from the man. The concluding judgment is that they must marry men from within their own tribes in order as not produce an inequity in the land owned by any particular tribe. Thus, political harmony takes precedence over individual justice for all.

But, on reflection, why does this anecdote about the daughters come up at the very end of Bamidbar? These political principles could have been conveyed in a much

more direct manner. The final ruling from God seems to be a compromise, i.e., a balancing act between political needs and individual needs, between the more just ruling, from the individual's point of view, in the previous sedra, and the least just treatment of women inferred in the discussion of the necessary assent by the responsible man in allowing a woman's vow to be in effect. I found it interesting that Bamidabar Rabba asks a related question. A midrash reports that the daughters of Zelophe-had were righteous because "they married none but such as were worthy of them." Then it asks, "Why did the Holy One, Blessed be He, introduce them to Moses at the end of his career?" The answer, "In order that Moses might not plume himself on having separated from his wife for forty years.(Because of his constant communication with God he was required to be abstinent in order to remain holy) The Holy One, blessed be He, informed him through these (that he had no grounds for such feeling), saying: `here are women who have not been commanded (to refrain from marital intercourse) and yet only married such as were worthy of them." A note states that they waited forty years to find such men. Other midrashim similarly refer to the role of the women as the keepers of virtue in the community. In other words they protect men from their defenselesssness in the face of seductions.

In contrast to God's decree that the women of Midian who had carnal knowledge with men, and thus could and did corrupt men, should be killed, the daughters of Zeloph-had who were virtuous were honored. Even though political realities required modification, the over-riding theme IS that moral behavior is an ideal

that the Israelites must strive to attain, knowing that such an ideal never occurs in reality because of the many competing pressures, individual, group, and political.

It is interesting to note that in Mesopotamia during the second and third millenia BCE the legal form of transfer of property was the system of patrimony, i.e., land transfers were effected within the framework of a patriarchal tribal system, the land was passed on within the tribe (remember the phrase roshei ha-avot lmishpachot). This system was clearly adopted by the Israelites. Thus, when the roshim come to Moses to complain about the dangers of inheritance by daughters, they are invoking age old customs in the area and stress that their prerogatives should not be abrogated in such a revolutionary way.

One last thought, in this the bicentennial of the French Revolution, it seems plausible to consider that the inclusion of the story of Zeloph-had's daughters at the point the land is about to be conquered and inhabited points both to the truly revolutionary ideals laid out in the Torah as well as its social pragmatism and avoidance of anarchy. There is to an attempt to communicate the ideal in defining moral values, i.e., the inherent justice, as Rashi implies, of genuine universal equality. The final result in this stage of history was a balance between the prevailing local custom of patrimony and the desire to allocate equitable rights for the Israelite woman: an ancient precursor in the battle for women rights.