



CONGREGATION
Netivot Shalom

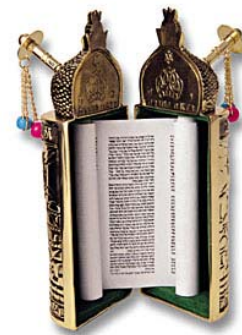
www.netivotshalom.org

Judaism 101

A class (not just) for beginners

Torah Discovery

CHOVERET / READER



© 2007 Rabbi Menachem Creditor

2 Kisleiv, 5768
November 12, 2007

Dear Judaism 101 Participants,

Shalom! Welcome to the first installment of our Judaism 101 series: **Torah Discovery!** While the Jews are known as “The People of the Book”, Torah Literacy is perhaps not as much an assumption but rather a journey to be chosen and pursued. Each book of the Torah has its own styles and directions.

During our time together we'll:

- tour sections of each book and enter a discussion of Who Wrote the Bible and its implications
- investigate the Jewish interpretive tradition and ask whether or not the foundation for modern Judaism can be found within the Biblical text
- analyze certain Biblical personalities and ideas in their original textual contexts

We will not be focusing on Hebrew language, as our time is limited, but I do encourage each of you to find opportunities to acquire Hebrew skills – they unlock everything else. If, as a group, you would like to engage a Hebrew teacher, we could work together to engage a proper instructor.

As a reminder, class will be held on Monday nights, from **7:45pm-9:00pm** on 11/12, 11/19, 12/3, and 12/10. The 12/17 session will be rescheduled as a group. Netivot Shalom's Judaism 101 courses are meant for those rediscovering or deepening Judaism, and those considering conversion to Judaism. Our learning will be both accessible to non-Hebrew speakers and stimulating to those familiar with the Torah. A suggested \$50 donation to Netivot Shalom will help defray our material costs.

Thank you for choosing to learn at Netivot Shalom – we are stronger with you!

Kol Tuv,
Rabbi Menachem Creditor

Birkat HaTorah

(p. 6 in the original Siddur Sim Shalom)

**Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech Ha'Olam,
Asher Kidshanu BeMitzvotav, VeTzivanu La'asok BeDivrei Torah.**

Bless You Adonai our God, Master of the Universe, who made us **Kadosh** with mitzvot, and commanded us to **be busy** with words of Torah.

Netivot Shalom: Judaism 101: Torah Discovery – Syllabus

note: ^{BV} = excerpt from "Reading the Book: Making the Bible a Timeless Text," by Rabbi Burton Visotzky

11/12 **Intro to Chumash & Genesis:** The Creation Stories

11/19: **Exodus:** The Ten Commandments

readings for class:

📖 **Torah**

Ex. Chapters 19-20

📖 **Secondary**

"What does the word 'Torah' refer to?" (choveret p.8)

"What is Torah" (choveret p.9-10)

Princess Di Delivers Two-Headed Monster ^{BV}

📖 **Optional**

"The Study of Torah" (choveret p.4-5)

"Reading and Studying" (choveret p.6-7)

God Dictates, Moses Composes ^{BV}

12/3: **Leviticus:** The Holiness Code

readings for class:

📖 **Torah**

Lev. Chapters 19-20

📖 **Secondary**

"The Traditionalist Option" (choveret p.14-18)

📖 **Optional**

12/10: **Numbers:** Challenges to Authority

readings for class:

📖 **Torah**

Num. Chapters 12,16

📖 **Secondary**

"The Liberal Option" (choveret p.18-23)

Siblings ^{BV}

📖 **Optional**

"Jots and Tittles" (choveret p.24-26)

Session V: **Deuteronomy:** Retelling the Story

readings for class:

📖 **Torah**

Deut. Chapters 6,34

📖 **Secondary**

Dying ^{BV}

📖 **Optional**

The Architecture of the Universe ^{BV}

Reading the Book ^{BV}

CHAZAK CHAZAK VENITCHAZEK!

Through My Strength and Your Strength may we be Strengthened!



Judaism 101: A class (not just) for beginners

Torah Discovery

© 2007 Rabbi Menachem Creditor

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Torah Study

- 7-8 **Reading and Studying**
Dr. Barry Holtz
From myjewishlearning.com
- 9 **Spirituality of Texts**
Dr. Michael Fishbane
from Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary
- 10 **Studying Torah Is a Way of Worshipping God**
Rabbi Harold Kushner
from To Life!: A Celebration of Jewish Being and Thinking
- 11-12 **Overview: Tanakh: The Jewish Bible**
From myjewishlearning.com
- 13-15 **Jots and Tittles**
Jeffrey Spitzer
From myjewishlearning.com
- 16-21 **Text and Context: Torah and Historical Truth from an Orthodox Perspective**
Professor Barry Levy
The Edah Journal 2:1

II. A Breisheet/Genesis Sampler – p. 22-31

Bereshit 5760 (1999): "The God of Nature vs. The God of History"
Chancellor Ismar Schorsch

Bereshit 5760 (1999)
Rabbi Alexander Even-Chen

B'reishit: "The Power of a Name: The Power of Naming"
Rabbi Andrew Davids

Bereshit 5763 (2002): "Seeing Redemption"
Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz

Beresheet: "The Gloria Steinem of Eden"
Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson

Breisheet 5764 (2003): "Impulsiveness and Premeditation"
Rabbi Menachem Creditor

III. A Shemot/Exodus Sampler– p. 32-36

Shemot 2002/5763: "Salvation without a Name"
Rabbi Menachem Creditor

Yitro 5761
Rabbi Ismar Schorsch

Parashat Mishpatim - Shabbat Shekalim: *Spirituality in the Everyday*
Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson

Parashat Vayakhel-Pekudei - Shabbat HaChodesh
Rabbi Lewis Warshauer

VI. A VaYikra/Leviticus Sampler– p. 37-46

Parashat Emor 2003/5763: "What's Holy and What's Not"
Rabbi Menachem Creditor

A Reflection on Judaism and Homosexuality
Rabbi Menachem Creditor

Worshipping a Movement or Seeking Truth?
Rabbi Menachem Creditor

VII. A BeMidbar/Numbers Sampler– p. 47-54

Parashat BeMidbar 2003/5763: "Waiting"

Rabbi Menachem Creditor

Naso: Longing to see God's 'face'

Dr. Neil Gillman

Parashat Korah 5762

Rabbi Matt Berkowitz

Parashat Pinhas: "WHO'S NEXT? THE CHANGE AND CHALLENGE OF LEADERSHIP"

Cantor Janice L. Roger

VIII. A Devarim/Deuteronomy Sampler – p.55-59

Parashat Devarim: The Power of Words

Rabbi Steven Carr Reuben

Ekev 5763

Rabbi Lauren Eichler Berkun

Parashat Ha'azinu/Shabbat Shuvah: "Is God Straight?"

Rabbi Menachem Creditor

6

6

IX. Additional Material – pagination beginning after page 59

11-13 Stacking Your Books

14-18 The Traditionalist Option

18-23 The Liberal Option

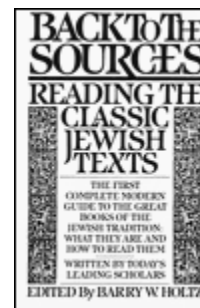
35-42 If it Looks Like a Banana

Reading and Studying: ***Studying Jewish texts is not just a religious act, it is an act of communal identification and communication.***

Dr. Barry W. Holtz

www.myjewishlearning.com

I have been speaking about "reading" the classic Jewish texts (and also, of course, about the way that in the Jewish tradition texts tend to be "readings" of other, earlier texts), but we must also consider ways in which our idea of reading might differ markedly from other such notions in the past. In fact, traditional Jews rarely speak about reading texts at all; rather, one talks about studying or learning these sacred books. Thus we must ask: is the difference between reading and learning something more than merely a matter of terminology?



Although I have argued above that reading may be a good deal more active an occupation than we usually think, it is nonetheless a solitary activity. We sit alone with a book as we read. Learning or studying can imply something very different. It is important to remember that most traditional Jewish "reading" occurs in a social context, in the class or the study session. In the world of the yeshiva (school for Rabbinic studies), Jewish learning is carried on in a loud, hectic hall called the bet midrash (study house) where students sit in pairs or threesomes, reading and discussing out loud, back and forth. The atmosphere is nothing like the silent library we are accustomed to. Reading in the yeshiva is conducted in a room with a constant, incessant din; it is as much talk as it is reading. In fact, the two activities of reading and discussion are virtually indistinguishable.

7 Reading thus becomes less an act of self-reflection than a way of communal identification and communication. One studies to become part of the Jewish people itself. As much as prayer, study is a ritual act of the community. The sociologist Samuel Heilman, in *The People of the Book* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1983), talks about these learning environments as providing a "sentimental education" in which Jews gain access to the values of their tradition and live out those values by the very act of study. Through the study discussions, Jews actually replicate the world of the Talmud. It is as if distinctions of time and place are erased, and the participant is catapulted back to Rabbi Akiba's academy 1800 years in the past. The learner joins in the discussions, voices his opinion, is defended or refuted by the legendary teachers and students of other ages and takes his place in the continuum of the tradition.

7 There is much to be said for such an understanding, since it gives a taste of the rich emotional world connected in a very close way to the classic Jewish texts. These are not only books that one reads or rereads and sets on the shelf. They live, too, in the context of hours of human repartee, of struggle and illumination in community. Part of the great allure of study for Jews over the centuries must have some connection to this interpersonal domain. Thus the texts are "interactive" in two senses: in the way reading is lively and dialogic, and in the way we get to speak to our companions when we study, debate, and ponder the texts aloud.

Moreover, the texts are bound to the lives of individual Jews in ways beyond reading and studying. The entire liturgical structure of the Jewish year resounds with echoes of the great sources. First and foremost is the role of the prayerbook, the daily instrument of worship, which contains within it quotations and allusions to the Bible, to Talmudic sources, to poems of the Middle Ages, rituals of Kabbalah, and even to the philosophy of Maimonides (in the popular hymn known as Yigdal).

But the texts have connections beyond the prayerbook. Each Sabbath a portion from the Torah and from the Prophets is chanted in the synagogue. On certain holidays one of the Five Megillot

(scrolls) is read: Song of Songs on Passover, the Book of Ruth on Shavuot (the festival that is celebrated seven weeks after Passover in the early summer), Ecclesiastes on Sukkot (the festival of booths, the fall harvest holiday), Esther on Purim, and Lamentations on the Ninth of Av, the summer fast day commemorating the destruction of the Temples. The holiday of Passover uses the Haggadah, a work of rabbinic literature, as the central text for the Seder meal, and on Hanukkah we sing medieval liturgical poems and recite a passage from a rabbinic law code. The texts are always there throughout the year and throughout the life cycle, in the rituals for birth, bar mitzvah, marriage, and death. The marriage document, for example, read out at the wedding ceremony, reminds us of our ties to the textual tradition of the past: it is written even today in Aramaic, the language of the Talmud.

Thus the texts are connected to study and to prayer. They formed the basis of meditation for the mystical tradition (it is not surprising from all this that letter-mysticism is central to the Jewish method of contemplation!), and they live in the daily, weekly, and ongoing rituals of the Jewish people.

Jewish study and learning, we have suggested, are not merely the activities of the library or the reader in isolation, but rather live in social and religious contexts. A particularly significant feature of the religious context is the fact that traditional learning is invariably done with a master, someone who can guide one's encounter with the text and help make sense of what may be arcane, confusing, or beyond one's grasp. The teacher in such an environment has a special kind of authority--different, I believe, from the role of a teacher in a normal American school or university--because the traditional texts themselves are based to a great degree on a sense of the authority of wisdom. Such an attitude may go back to ancient days when the Oral Torah really was oral and learning was a kind of discipleship. Although the texts have long been written down, we still venerate the learned teacher, and the texts themselves reinforce this, representing the tradition as a human chain in which one builds on the teachings and insights and legal judgments of the sages who have preceded us.

Thus the solitary reader is at a considerable disadvantage. Not having the social context of fellow students, not having the reliable authority of the wise master, he is very much left to his own devices and may, in fact, be stuck in his own peculiar quicksand.

Spirituality of Texts

Dr. Michael Fishbane

from Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary

Judaism is a text culture that always has been nurtured by study and interpretation. The interpreter and the text interpenetrate in dynamic ways. The individual finds and realizes that the layers of his or her deepest self have been "textualized" by study, so that the sacred texts provide the language for ongoing life experience and inspiration. The text, on the other hand, reveals itself through the accumulated readings of its many seekers and learners. In a profound reciprocal way, every renewal of the self is simultaneously a renewal of the text, while every deadening of human sensibility is a simultaneous deadening of the life breath of the text.

The biblical text is a shaping of the divine spirit by the human breath of Moses and the prophets; but it may speak now only through the spirit and breath of its interpreters. Martin Buber [the 20th-century Jewish philosopher] once said that the task of the biblical translator is to overcome "the leprosy of fluency," a disease of the spirit that can lead us to imagine that we already know what we are reading, causing us blithely and triumphantly to read past the text.

The effective translator must, therefore, reformulate the word or the words of the text to produce a new encounter with its language and thus facilitate a new hearing and a new understanding. The spiritual task of interpretation, likewise, is to affect or alter the pace of reading so that one's eye and ear can be addressed by the text's words and sounds--and thus reveal an expanded or new sense of life and its dynamics.

The pace of technology and the patterns of modernity pervert this vital task. The rhythm of reading must, therefore, be restored to the rhythm of breathing, to the cadence of the cantillation marks of the sacred text. Only then will the individual absorb the texts with his or her life breath and begin to read liturgically, as a rite of passage to a different level of meaning. And only then may the contemporary idolization of technique and information be transformed, and the sacred text restored as a living teaching and instruction, for the constant renewal of the self.

Studying Torah Is a Way of Worshipping God

Rabbi Harold Kushner

from To Life!: A Celebration of Jewish Being and Thinking

Jewish prayer is not a matter of informing God as to what we believe and what we need, but of seeking His presence and being transformed by it. We don't ask God to change the world to make it easier for us. We ask Him only to assure us that He will be with us as we try to do something hard.

Jews worship God through study. The central moments of a Sabbath morning service are dedicated to reading aloud not merely a brief passage from the Bible but several chapters of the Torah, so that in the course of the year, the entire Five Books of Moses will have been studied aloud [or, in some communities, over a three-year cycle].

In the autumn, on Simchat Torah after the High Holy Days, we begin "In the beginning," with the Creation story, and week by week, chapter by chapter, omitting nothing (who are we to pass judgment on God's word, deciding that the story of Joseph and his brothers is edifying but the laws about leprosy and menstrual flow are not?), we come to the end of Deuteronomy just as we are running out of year and preparing for the Holy Day season again. At that point, we are ready to start all over again, finding new insights in the Torah, not because it has changed but because we have.

Why this emphasis on study? One of my seminary professors used to say, "When I pray, I speak to God. When I study Torah, I keep quiet and let God speak to me." If worship is the effort to connect with God, Judaism affirms that we don't have to do all the work ourselves. God is prepared to meet us halfway. By immersing ourselves in Torah, we transport ourselves back to Sinai, to the presence of God. Some people have used fasting, drugs, or forms of self-hypnosis to summon up the presence of God. We have never had to resort to those measures. Like the wife whose husband is away on a business trip and who conquers her loneliness by rereading his letters, we turn to the Torah and feel God's presence.

A second reason for this unique emphasis on study is the Jewish perception that what is uniquely human about a person is his mind and his conscience. Our physical self is the part of us that we share with the animals. Our mind and conscience are the dimension we share with God. When we exercise our minds and consciences by studying God's word on how a person should live, when we occupy our thoughts with questions of how to carry out God's will rather than with matters of finance, fashion, or sports, we feel that we are developing our uniquely human aspect.

Overview: Tanakh: The Jewish Bible

From myjewishlearning.com

The Hebrew Bible, also known as Mikra (“what is read”) or **TaNakh**, an acronym referring to the traditional Jewish division of the Bible into **Torah** (Teaching), **Nevi'im** (Prophets), and **Ketuvim** (Writings), is the founding document of the people of Israel, describing its origins, history, and visions of a just society. The word Bible, from the Greek, *ta biblia*, is plural and means “books.” This reflects the fact that the Bible is actually a collection of individual books (such as Genesis, Exodus, Isaiah, Song of Songs, and many others). Similarly, another traditional name for the Torah, Humash (“of Five”), indicates that the Torah itself is a book composed of five books.

Perhaps our conception of the Bible as one book is a result of our having one-volume printed Bibles; in ancient times, individual books were published in smaller scrolls; the word Bible, however, comes from the Greek *ta biblia*, which is plural and means books. Even the individual books can include a variety of different genres of writing—narratives, poetry, legal texts, prophecies—which makes reading the Bible as a unified book that much more difficult. Collecting the books and deciding which ones were to be included as part of the Bible and which were not is called the process of canonization; canonization of the Hebrew Bible was concluded during the first century CE. We have fragments and significant portions of the Bible from before that time, but our earliest complete manuscripts date from the ninth century C.E. and later; remarkably, through hundreds of years of transmission, the received text, what we call the Masoretic text, differs only slightly from those earliest fragments.

Where did the Bible come from? Traditionally, Jews have claimed that all five books of the Torah were revealed to Moses on Mt. Sinai. The prophets were the authors of their own books as well as others that are attributed to them (Lamentations is attributed to the prophet Jeremiah), and Kings David and Solomon each wrote several works (eg. Psalms is attributed to King David). Internal contradictions as well as shifts in language and outlook have convinced many modern scholars that the Torah and later historical narratives, as well as the books of the prophets and some of the writings, had multiple authors or redactors who edited traditional materials together, leaving some of the seams between the sources. Some of the critical theories that break apart the Bible into its various sources were initially suggested by Christian theologians who used their arguments to advance claims that later Judaism was a corruption of early biblical religion. Since that time, however, many Jewish scholars have integrated the insights drawn from a critical approach; a Redactor or Redactors (known as “R”) may have edited together different sources, but contemporary Jewish scholars may understand “R” (whether singular or plural) as standing for Rabbenu, our Rabbi and teacher.

The Bible is not a difficult book to begin learning, although its complexity makes it difficult to master. A biblical narrative does not stand on its own; some contemporary literary theorists of the Bible take their lead from the midrash and read the Bible as a whole, reading how parts of the Torah reflect on other parts, and how the Prophets and Writings similarly refer to earlier narratives and laws. From a canonical perspective, reading the book of Exodus is a first step; reading how the prophet Ezekiel retells the story of the exodus is a next step. Reading the scroll of Esther is a first step; rereading the story of Joseph to tease out the similarities is a next step.

Similarly, one can read the Bible in the context of the cognate literatures that grew up in a similar ancient near eastern environment. How is the Noah story similar to or different from the Gilgamesh epic? How are the laws of Exodus similar to and different from Hammurabi’s code?

Or one might read the Bible in light of the ongoing search for a life of sanctification and redemption, as the Rabbis did. How does the Bible relate to Jewish theology or religious practice? One can study the Bible from a variety of different perspectives--literary, historical, anthropological, theological; as the rabbinic sage Ben Bag Bag said, “Turn it, and turn it, for

everything is found within it.” By turning our study of the Bible through the many and varied approaches adopted by Jews and non-Jews throughout the generations, we gain a valuable perspective on the Bible itself. By examining the various readings of the Bible, we also gain perspective on the diversity of human cultures that have sought to interpret the Bible.

Jots and Tittles

Jeffrey Spitzer

From myjewishlearning.com

Rav Yehuda quoted Rav:

When Moses ascended to the Heights [to receive the Torah] he found God sitting and drawing crownlets upon the letters. Moses said to God, "Master of the Universe, what is staying Your hand [from giving me the Torah unadorned]?"

God replied, "There is a man who will arise many generations in the future, his name is Akiba b. Yosef. He will exegetically infer mound upon mound of halakhot (laws) from each and every tittle."

Moses requested, "Master of the Universe, show him to me." God said, "Turn backwards [and you will see him]."

Moses [found himself in R. Akiba's classroom where he] sat at the back of the eighth row. He didn't understand what they were talking about and felt weak. Then, they came to a matter about which the students asked Akiba, "Rabbi, how do you know this?" He told them, "It is the [oral] law given to Moses at Sinai." Moses felt relieved.

He returned to God and said, "Master of the Universe, you have a person like this and [still You choose to] give the Torah through my hands?" God replied, "Silence! This is according to My plan."

Moses said, "Master of the Universe, you've shown me his teaching (Torah), show me his reward." God said, "Turn [backwards and you may see it]. Moses turned around and beheld [the Roman torturers] weighing his [Akiba's] flesh on the market scales. He said to God, "Master of the Universe, that was his Torah and this is his reward!?"

God said, "Silence! This is according to My plan"

-Babylonian Talmud, Menachot

29b

This legend is often retold to demonstrate that, despite the rabbinic mythology that the entire written and oral Torahs had been revealed to Moses on Sinai, the third century rabbis who told this story were aware that the details of the law had indeed changed since the time of Moses. This is the clear meaning of Moses' inability to understand what R. Akiba is discussing and his rather remarkable seat in the very back of the classroom.

At the same time, R. Akiba's claim that the law that he was teaching actually emanated from Moses on Sinai is presented with complete sincerity, and according to the story, with God's intention and support. God, after all, was adding the "jots and tittles" to the letters of the Torah in order that they might be interpreted. Moses, on the other hand, only had a very limited "snapshot" perception, both of the Torah he received as well as the state of the Oral Torah in the generation of Rabbi Akiba. Consequently, Moses can understand neither why he was worthy of receiving God's Torah in the first place or of understanding R. Akiba's martyrdom.

The conception underlying this legend is that God encoded the Torah with additional meanings beyond the "plain meaning" of the text. This assumption of the divine economy of speech—that God does not waste words—coupled with the assumption that God's revelation to Israel was

complete, provided the basis for systems of interpretation that treat the Bible as something like a code. Such freedom of interpretation is, of course, destabilizing; without strict rules governing such interpretations, almost anything might be permitted or prohibited. Such rules and limits did exist. There are no recorded examples of R. Akiba or anyone else actually interpreting the crowns on the letters, although the interpretation of words deemed "superfluous" was generally an accepted procedure.

One of the common kinds of interpretation that assumed this vision of an encoded Torah is the gezerah shavah (literally, "a comparison of equals"), in which the use of the same term in two distinct parts of the Torah allows the application of a detail from the one case to the other, unrelated case. Gezerah shavah is not simply a good philological method—figuring out the meaning of a word in one case by examining its use in others. A gezerah shavah can apply unrelated details relating to the one context to the interpretation of the other instance of the word. For example, the Talmud makes a gezerah shavah between the phrase "this **good** mountain" (understood to be Jerusalem in Deuteronomy 3:28) and the phrase "and you shall eat, be satisfied, and bless the **good** land" (Deuteronomy 8:10) to derive authority for the third paragraph of the blessing after food, which refers to the rebuilding of Jerusalem. Opponents of such radical readings of Scripture, realizing how someone might use such a powerful tool as gezerah shavah to blow huge holes in bodies of established rabbinic interpretation, adopted a rule that one could only use a gezerah shavah if there were already a tradition establishing it.

Another implication of the perfection of the Bible is that no word is considered superfluous. If a law is repeated in two places, the rabbis might interpret the duplication to prove the requirement to warn someone about the law before punishment could be exacted. Or the use of the infinitive absolute (e.g., hikaret tikaret, "you will surely be cut off"), which in Hebrew is expressed with a doubling of a verb, might "prove" that the first term applies to this world, and the second to the world to come.

Other rules that assume a perfect text include "al tikre"—do not read the text this way, change the vowels and read it this way. Other variants include notarikon in which words are seen as acronyms or anagrams of other terms.

Gematria, which creates interpretations based on the numerical value of words (the first letter, aleph=1; the second, bet=2, and so on) is attested early on. During medieval times, the use of gematria became much more widespread and even became the basis for certain aspects of Jewish law. This powerful tool, like the gezerah shavah, also faced opposition. Nachmanides, a 13th century Kabbalist and commentator, argued that one should not make up a gematria on one's own.

In late antique and medieval times, these hermeneutic methods and the assumptions of the sanctity of the text spread to documents other than the Bible. The Talmudic interpreters of the Mishnah assumed that the text of the Mishnah lacks superfluous words. Medieval Ashkenazic pietists assumed that the precise number of words and letters in the texts of prayers reflected cosmic truths, and using gematria, they developed an entire number theory of the liturgy. Their readings were opposed both by those who did not accept the method of applying gematria to the relatively fluid (and human) texts of Jewish liturgy, as well as by those whose alternate versions of the liturgical texts didn't "add up."

In modern times, the most "popular" form of interpretation along these lines is study of so-called "Bible-codes." This method, which is facilitated by computers, finds meaning by uncovering words and phrases that occur at equidistant intervals throughout the Biblical text. Some Jewish groups have argued that the presence of meaningful Bible codes as proof of the divinity of the Bible. Nowadays, most of the research on Bible codes is being done by Christians seeking proof of Christianity as well as previously undiscovered "prophecies" about contemporary events. As in

every generation, Bible-code researchers face opposition by those who considered these methods as distorting the plain meaning of Scripture. In this, case, however, the critics have had to use the same computer methodologies to disprove the "miraculous" or "prophetic" claims. Critics have argued that the results are merely a function of how Hebrew works, and have found equidistant letter sequences in the Hebrew translation of War and Peace (proving that Tolstoy is God?!).

Throughout history, Jews have adopted various models of interpretation that rely on an assumption that the Torah is perfect. At the same time, other voices in Jewish tradition have sought to limit how those models are used. The phenomenon of the development of these models of interpretation reflects the ongoing desire of Jews to find divine authority or justification for their beliefs. Whether those beliefs and models of interpretation will make a long-term impact on Judaism's ongoing discovery of God's revealed will is not apparent. Like Moses sitting in Rabbi Akiba's classroom, we do not have the luxury of historical perspective on our own time.

Text and Context: Torah and Historical Truth from an Orthodox Perspective

Professor Barry Levy

The Edah Journal 2:1

Many observers see religion as a system of beliefs espoused by people who would describe themselves as believers. These beliefs and believers are perceived to stand at one pole, opposite an alternative called heresy, which is accepted by individuals often called heretics, usually by self-designated believers who disagree with them. Much of the religious world divides the range of religious ideas and their adherents into these opposing categories, reminiscent of the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness, eschatological enemies depicted in a military text discovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls.

It is relatively easy to call people heretics. It is much harder, for some reason, for believers to acknowledge that others, particularly those outside their own religious community, are also believers. The believers and the heretics often disagree with each other quite forcefully. Whatever names the combatants actually bear, many of the internal debates among Jews—which pit the Orthodox against the non-Orthodox, or the Modern Orthodox against the *haredim*—focus on what is a proper belief or a heretical one, or who is a believer and who is a heretic.

For many people the distinction ends there, but even in the popular mindset—which is what I am attempting to describe here—this duality does not adequately describe the full extent of religion-related discourse. In fact, we can identify not two poles, but three foci. To the first two classifications, one can add the critics, who on any particular issue may agree with the believers or the heretics. One should speak, then, not about believers and heretics, but about believers, heretics, and critics. It is even possible for an individual to carry two or all three of these designations. I frequently do, depending as much on where I am as on what I say.

Significant differences exist among these three groups, yet believers regard the heretics and the critics as essentially one group. Similarly, the heretics sometimes see the believers and the critics as too closely aligned and distance themselves from both. Finally, the critics may see the believers and the heretics as sharing an excessive devotion to doctrine, albeit of very different sorts, and may regard only themselves as clear-thinking.

This tri-partite array of believers and heretics and critics can be pictured as the three corners of a triangle. If on this triangle one draws a line separating the believers from the others, the heretics from the others and the critics from the others, one creates a six-pointed star. This does not explain, of course, the historical origins of the Magen David, but it can serve to symbolize the ways in which one can group and interrelate many ideas essential to the study of Judaism. Debates about substantive matters reveal the difficulty in defining a position espoused by only one of the three groups. And attempts to determine who actually deserves to be categorized as believer, heretic, or critic often depend on issues of reputation. For example, most Orthodox Jews today, if given the opportunity to examine anonymous selections from writings by rabbis whom they would unhesitatingly acknowledge as believers, would quickly label those writings as heresy or criticism. A highly learned reader may be more successful, but even relative sophisticates—day school graduates and others who have lived in the Orthodox community for decades and whose lives reflect its teachings and values—would be surprised by the critical or heretical-sounding statements of recognized authorities. Despite their vividness and seeming relevance, therefore, one should be very wary of employing these three terms in any systematic way. And even though I believe this to be a helpful way to introduce the subject, I prefer to break down these artificial barriers.

Questions regarding historical-critical method ostensibly partake of criticism, but may be included in the other categories as well. Orthodox Jews face specific problems with this method that can differentiate them from other religious Jews. Some are classic issues of Jewish learning that have

engaged traditionalists for several millennia; others are not. Here the methodological questions surrounding learning begin to pose a serious challenge. Among the assumptions underlying historical-critical method is the need to approach a text with a degree of subjectivity. From an Orthodox point of view, however, it is all very nice for someone to study the Bible or the Talmud in order to determine what a particular text is going to mean to him or her, but the real meaning is dictated—or at least suggested—by traditional sources. To approach a problem or text critically, one must be willing to think outside the traditional framework, as it is regularly presented today. In order to do that, one must be openly subjective and apply strategies that may lead to conclusions differing significantly from those normally taught. The key is thinking critically and subjectively about the material, rather than simply accepting what one reads.

Another important aspect of historical-critical analysis is the effort to contextualize all texts and ideas, on the premise that any text or idea can be understood best if placed in its original context. This assumption does not preclude applying other approaches to the same text, but it does mean that contextual influences play a major role in the critical thinker's perception of how the text came to be, what it says, what it originally meant, and arguably what it could or should mean today. For example, the attitudes towards government and its polity in various Jewish cultures were developed in response to the treatment of Jews by particular governments. In one context, the attitude toward the state may be positive, in another it may be negative. Any understanding of rabbinic thinking, halakhic rulings, and general public attitudes about this question must be understood in context.

A third form of historical-critical analysis deals with what is often called lower criticism: the determination of the correct text. Simply put, before we actually get to the point of making decisions based on specific texts, we must determine with precision what the correct text is. One of the great challenges in dealing with Rashi's Torah commentary is the great uncertainty about exactly what he wrote. Rashi exists in Ashkenazic and Sephardic editions, or at least in editions that one could associate with medieval Ashkenazic and Sephardic readers. Recent research demonstrates that, at least once every chapter on average, his commentary has been changed by the Tosafists or in response to their criticisms. Before doing anything else, one must know what the text is.

Similarly, the ancient Greek version of Jeremiah differs significantly from the Hebrew one and is based on (or textually related to) a variant Hebrew version of the book discovered in part among the Dead Sea Scrolls. While we assume the canonical form of the book is correct for ritual considerations, i.e. no one would advocate reading a *haftarah* from the Dead Sea Scroll version, for historical purposes we need to know more about the text of Jeremiah than the canonical Hebrew version alone can tell us.

I recently published a book entitled *Fixing God's Torah*.¹ The title surprises many people who wonder how I can write about "fixing" the Torah. Indeed, how can I even use the two words together? But "fixing" and Torah really do go together. Scribes who write Torah scrolls use books called *tiqqunim* (related to the Hebrew word meaning "fix"), and people who prepare to read the Torah on Shabbat do likewise. In fact, my book discusses the extent to which the great medieval and post-medieval rabbis were engaged in determining the proper text of the Torah, a subject that may strike some readers as purely critical and others as downright heretical. Actually it is neither. Dealing with what the text *is* must precede saying anything else *about* it—its importance, its impact, and its potential uses. Until we figure out what the text of Rashi actually contains, we should probably stop making it the cornerstone of our educational programs. Instead, we should allow its place to be shared with other rabbinic commentaries that are equally useful. I make this comment not to disparage Rashi, but in recognition of Rashbam's report in his commentary on Gen. 37:2 of his grandfather's wish to have had the time to write additional commentary on the basis of novel understandings of *peshat*, and because much of what has been written about Rashi and the details of his commentaries may need to be re-done with a proper text available.

Finally, we come to the question of history. When I first started studying at Yeshiva University, history had a bad name. Even then, some people, especially some rabbis, did not appreciate history. In the last twenty-five or thirty years, the religious world reacted against historical thinking. History assumes the importance of context, even as it organizes and explains events systematically, categorically, and through universal causes and effects. It prioritizes types of evidence and develops positions not necessarily identical to those assumed in conceptual or thematic decision-making. A historical-critical analysis of *halakhah*, for example, assumes different perspectives, and therefore differs from a conceptual analysis in how it sees influences and process.

For this reason, historical-critical method really does present Modern Orthodox Jews with a serious dilemma. They are not only eager to develop their intellectual quests in new and interesting ways. They are also compelled by issues in the broader intellectual world to pursue this quest in historical-critical ways, even when such attempts seem to run counter to other rabbinic thinking. Post-modernism may help change that, because it favors approaches to thinking that are more subjective and less dependent on historical and text-critical assumptions. But even post-modernism admits the theoretical value of many historical-critical assumptions. Orthodox Jews are confronted by serious challenges in how they understand, in how they teach, and in how they explain the paths Judaism took on its complex journey from antiquity to today.

Indeed, Orthodox Judaism needs to ask the self-reflective question about why it has the character it does, and why its adherents think as they do. We should look at this question historically and critically and explore the origins of many of the seemingly pious assumptions that underlie much of what we do, but may not have been equally significant to previous generations of rabbinic leaders and their followers. Why, for example, has ritual rather than ethics come to be the overarching concern of the Orthodox world? Why are dietary restrictions based on previously unheard of halakhic minutiae of greater moment than those related to general well-being, e.g. how can a food be given kosher certification when we know its contents to be unhealthy? Many of the individual components that make up Orthodox doctrine are of relatively recent vintage. The mix of contemporary attitudes—perhaps most significantly the intellectual isolationism evident in much of the Orthodox world today—is actually one of the most radical rabbinic innovations of all time.

To confront the impact of contemporary rabbinic thinking through the historical-critical challenge, one must scour the classical rabbinic literature, find models of the strategies that we believe are appropriate, and exploit them in our own contexts and in our own particular ways. In the *Guide for the Perplexed* (III: 29, 37), Maimonides observed that, if we knew more about ancient times, we would better understand the rationales behind the Torah's laws. This argument attempts to contextualize divine law, and it suggests the value of historical reasoning in religious thinking. Maimonides also wrote about his reading of contemporary pagan books to learn about the ancient pagan world, so he could understand the culture and the practices to which the Torah seemed to be responding. This is very much a modern sounding argument, but it is not. It is an old strategy that has become a cornerstone of historical-critical thinking, and it is decidedly unpopular in certain circles. Yet it allows, perhaps even demands, that historical contextualizing be explored and developed.

Similarly, text-critical work is a natural and important part of many classical rabbinic books; in fact, anyone who studies Mishnah, Talmud, *midrash*, and the like, finds rabbinic discussions of textual variants virtually everywhere. The editors of the Mishnah printed the variants right on the page; the printers of Babylonian Talmud did likewise. The Vilna Gaon, Rabbi Baruch Halevi Epstein (author of the *Torah Temimah*), and many other respected writers concerned themselves with textual details and inconsistencies.

These are classic attempts to fix the texts, to correct them, to establish them, and to deal with inconsistencies in a text-critical way. Early commentators on the Talmud were more sensitive to issues surrounding the accuracy of texts than are most moderns, because they studied from manuscripts that often differed from one another in relatively significant and insignificant ways. Studying any text was predicated on first determining what it was.

Rabbinic culture today is generally far removed from such endeavors, and those who challenge the textual integrity of any holy book are often branded as heretics. The medieval rabbis studied from manuscripts, and they knew that manuscripts differ from one another. To see this applied to the Bible text, read any page of Norzi's *Minhat Shai*. To see it applied to rabbinic texts, particularly the Babylonian Talmud, examine the notes and commentaries of the Vilna Gaon, and Rabbis Hayyim Bachrach and Samuel Strashun, and *Diqduqei Soferim*, written by Raphael Rabbinovicz and supported by letters of approbation by seven rabbis, including Solomon Kluger, Joseph Saul Nathanson, Jacob Ettlinger, and Isaac Elchanan.

When the learning public shifted from studying manuscripts to studying printed books (mainly in the sixteenth century), much of this interest in fixing the text died out, partly because the job was done by printers (however inadequately) and partly because people for the most part now had identical texts and were not confronted daily with questions of textual inconsistency. While some people continued to improve on these texts, such matters came to be ignored, and the dynamics of learning moved to other considerations. As a result, the attitude towards the importance and sanctity of this work declined, and the popular response now is largely to avoid the subject, lest it somehow undermine the faithful.

The simple question about historical-critical thinking that confronts us is this: To what extent can we exploit these critical lines of argumentation in formulating an independent, responsible, authentically Orthodox approach to rabbinic learning?

We must see this as a legitimate educational problem, an issue in the training of teachers and rabbis and in the expectations we have of our religious leaders. Can we—dare we—accept teachers and rabbis who do not share a commitment to this historical-critical outlook, not to the exclusion of all other forms of learning but in addition to them? If they cannot appreciate the significant role such modes of thought played in classical rabbinic literature, and its potential value to the contemporary world, how can they satisfy modern Orthodox intellectual needs?

Let me illustrate with a story about a congregation in Montreal. Some years ago, a synagogue not far from where I live was between rabbis and it called on me before Passover to address the congregation some five or six times before and during the holiday. The members of this congregation knew me, because I had spoken there, but they asked come to an interview. When I arrived, they bluntly asked me whether I would say anything heretical from the *bimah*. I assured them I would not, but then added that I might say something controversial. They asked me what I meant. I said, "Suppose on *Pesah* I said that when the Hebrews were in Egypt they did not build the pyramids?" They were shocked and wanted to know why I would say such a thing. I replied that the pyramids were over a thousand years old when Abraham went to Egypt, and therefore they could not have been built Jewish slaves. In fact, no one who knows anything about ancient history believes the Hebrews built the pyramids. The Torah does not say they did; it says they built "store cities." Yet this error has somehow captured the popular consciousness. At Camp David, Begin lectured Sadat about how his Jewish ancestors had built the pyramids, and Sadat stood there shaking his head in affirmation. Neither man seems to have known the historical truth.

The notion that our ancestors built the pyramids is complete fiction with no religious concern underlying it, and yet here was a well meaning Orthodox synagogue whose leaders worried that my saying this in public on *Pesah* of all times would be a scandal and somehow weaken people's faith. In the end, with the rabbi's encouragement they accepted that I might be correct and they

hired me, but they also insisted I not discuss the matter from the *bimah*. Fantasy, it seems, can be more important than fact, and even mistakes that do not matter religiously are hard to correct. This was not a rightist synagogue. It was populated by sincere people who were committed to Judaism and wanted to avoid having anyone rock the boat.

To counter this type of response and gain the ability to correct both trivial and serious mistakes of this type, Orthodoxy must insure that historical-critical thinking develops grass-roots acceptance. It needs to weed out the errors and fallacies in popular thinking, the mistaken assumptions and their results. Orthodoxy must eschew those approaches it finds unsuccessful, yet it must value the historical-critical method and integrate it with the classical rabbinical learning to which it is so indebted. It must do this not merely because it is the most appropriate way for thinking members of the present generation to respond to the intellectual challenges that confront them. It also needs to do so because such thinking represents a significant part of the classical rabbinic approach that deserves to be followed. If we cannot do this, some Modern Orthodox Jews will never be comfortable feeling that the Torah in which we are engaged actually does approach truth.

The texts, and the strategic models needed to study them fully and properly, are in place. But while some of its members may do so, as a community Modern Orthodoxy lacks the critical mass of people and the commitment of its convictions to take advantage of them. This is less of a problem in Israel, because there one finds an Orthodox intelligentsia populous enough and stubborn enough to do what it thinks is appropriate. In North America we lack that critical mass of people. The few of us who work as Bible scholars are so rare that the religious community does not know what to do with us. No more than a half-dozen Orthodox Bible scholars roam the campuses of North America, and some of those who rightfully hold that title spend most of their time researching other things.

20

The fact is that the Talmud speaks about Joshua's writing the end of the Torah, and a list of medieval writers including Yehuda he-Hasid and Abraham Ibn Ezra were quite content to suggest not only post-Mosaic additions to the Torah but a human component to it. Some *midrashim* attribute the existence of unusually large or small letters to Moses' attempts to convey some message, as if it were his decision how these things should be done.

Critical sounding sources are plentiful. The problem is that we as a community do not talk about them. Our teachers are not trained to discuss them with students, and our rabbis are uninterested or actively discouraged from making these issues public. If the teachers and preachers are not sharing a highly significant segment of authentic rabbinic knowledge, it will be left to a few seemingly eccentric professors who are trying to change the world from their tenured positions in secular universities. We need you to help in the campaign.

20

It is important to do two things with regard to higher biblical criticism. On the one hand, it is crucial that people study the documentary hypothesis. I do not mean simply hearing a lecture or reading an article about it. And surely I do not suggest they bow low at the waist and say, "I believe in the documentary hypothesis." One must study it and the related challenges and problems. One must look at the text the way the critics look at it. One should see how the tradition responded to those same concerns, because those concerns were there all along. Believe it or not, the *midrashim* saw them all.

The question really is: How does one understand the history of grappling with certain kinds of textual inconsistencies, and what should this mean to us today? I assure you that Wellhausen, who made much of changes in the use of God's names from one passage in the Torah to another, did not discover the problem. It has a very long and distinguished history of discussion.

We must see where this theory came from, how it developed, what other possible solutions exist within the tradition, and whether a better suggestion can be put forth. Such historical study is not a simple thing, but it must be done.

Similarly, one must understand that there is a documented history of several millennia of Jewish answers to most critical and exegetical questions. The history of criticism is not quite as long, and the task of mastering it is actually less intimidating than mastering the relevant rabbinic literature. The Orthodox community cannot bridge these gaps in one generation, but every generation must be engaged in a study of these literatures and their underlying issues—both their relevance today and their evolution—and only then it can begin to grapple with the question.

When we talk about Judaism, we talk about the way we teach it, the way we live it, and the way we try to understand it. In general American culture, young children learn about the Easter Bunny, Santa Claus, George Washington’s chopping down the cherry tree, and the like. As they mature, they learn that these characters and the deeds attributed to them fit into a category of knowledge that is not necessarily the cornerstone of personal or political identity or history.

One of the problems Orthodoxy faces is that its educational system—which extends from the time the child learns to talk until late in life—has not developed the terminology to differentiate between history and folklore, between serious things and peripheral ones, between those issues on which it is willing to take a stand and those considered to be non-essential, between those that should be understood historically and those best taken some other way. Our greatest challenge today is not Reform, or Reconstructionism, or Conservatism, or Liberal Orthodoxy, or Centrist Orthodoxy, or Hasidism, or “Haredi-ism.” Our greatest collective problem—though it affects different groups in different ways—is Mindless Orthodoxy. This is the uncritical following of a fixed religious life whose most minute details are controlled or invented for us, that avoids rational debate in favor of faithful adherence to rituals, and that imagines salvation to be the guaranteed outcome of being both *frum* and wealthy.

Many of the greatest medieval rabbis were sensitive to some of these issues and, in their presentations and analyses, they reacted to them in ways that might cost many a contemporary rabbi his congregation’s trust, if not his job. The problem is that such language is foreign to contemporary Orthodox religious ethos and, as a result, thinking people are constantly drawn back to this same problem.

To use scientific terminology, with which many of you may be comfortable, “*Torah u-madda`*,” the long-standing slogan of Yeshiva University, is not the simple presence of two elements, *Torah* and *madda`*, in proximity. *Torah u-madda`* is a new compound that differs in many of its properties from *torah* plus *madda`*, just as the two independent elements, hydrogen and oxygen, differ from water. The *torah u-madda`* that I take as the basis of Modern Orthodox philosophy is the water. It is neither solely the hydrogen nor solely the oxygen of which it is composed, nor is it the mixture of the two, both of which are essential gases, but not much more. *Torah u-madda`* is a compound product, to be valued over “elemental *Torah*,” because the latter lacks the human component that enriches Torah once it has been placed by Heaven squarely in our hands.

Parashat Bereshit 5760 (1999): "The God of Nature vs. The God of History"

Chancellor Ismar Schorsch

The opening chapter of a book is often the last to be written. At the outset, the author may still lack a clear vision of the whole. Writing is the final stage of thinking, and many a change in order, emphasis, and interpretation is the product of wrestling with an unruly body of material. Only after all is in place does it become apparent what kind of introduction the work calls for.

I often think that is how the Torah came to open with its austere and majestic portrait of the creation of the cosmos. An act of hindsight appended a second account of creation.

One, in the form of chapter two, which begins more narrowly with the history of the earth and its first human inhabitants, would surely have been sufficient, especially since it argues graphically that evil springs from human weakness. All else is really quite secondary. I should like to suggest that the inclusion of a second creation story from a cosmic perspective, with all its inelegant redundancy and contradictions, was prompted by a need to address a deep rift that had appeared within the expanding legacy of sacred texts that would eventually crystallize as the Hebrew Bible.

The unfolding canon spoke with many voices. Chapter one of Genesis was intended to reconcile conflicting views toward the natural world. **Does reverence for nature lead to idolatry or monotheism?**

The first position is identified with the Torah, the five books of Moses, which exhibits a pervasive and deep-seated suspicion toward the natural world. God who is transcendent is neither to be sought nor experienced amid the wonders of nature. That is the cautionary message of the second of the Ten Commandments. The sweeping prohibition against the making of images of natural phenomena is a hedge against idolatry, against coming to worship the symbol itself instead of what it points to. In a long discourse on the public revelation at Mount Sinai.

22

Deuteronomy insists that the experience was wholly auditory. God had assumed no visible form and hence, "*When you look up to the sky and behold the sun and the moon and the stars, the whole heavenly host, you must not be lured into bowing down to them or serving them. These the Lord your God allotted to the other peoples everywhere under heaven (4:19).*"

22

...With nature off limits, the domain of pagan religion, the Torah privileged history as the only valid realm for discovering the power and compassion of God. ...[And therefore,] **the wondrous deeds of God (*niflaot*) manifest themselves not in sublime works of nature but miracles that punctuate the course of history** (for example Exodus 3:20, 15:12, 34:10, Judges 6:13, Psalms 96:3, 98:1, 106:7, 107:8).

However, the second position, with its fondness for nature as an approved path to the God of Israel, takes refuge in the third section of the Hebrew Bible, the Writings, where it dares to celebrate the grandeur and mystery of God's handiwork in nature. In direct contravention of the admonition of Deuteronomy, the author of Psalm 8 exclaims: "*When I behold Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and stars that You set in place, what is man that You have been mindful of him (verse 5)?*" Similarly, the author of Psalm 19 exults: "*The heavens declare the glory of God, the sky proclaims God's handiwork (verse 2).*" From this second perspective there is no fear that communion with nature might lead one to abandon pure monotheism.

The most extended articulation of radical amazement at the God of nature in the Hebrew Bible is the book of Job, wherein Job depicts God as the One "who makes things great beyond man's grasp, and wonders beyond any numbering (translation by Raymond P. Scheindlin, W.W. Norton, 1998, p.63). **Above all, it is the utter sublimity of nature unfurled by God in a grand finale that humbles Job into awed silence. [And therefore,] human suffering without end is not the result of sheer chaos but of a degree of order that will forever exceed human comprehension.**

Given this polarity of views on the world of nature, as either dangerous or edifying, I see in the opening chapter of Genesis an anticipatory attempt at reconciliation. The ambivalence toward nature is overcome by imagining a supreme act of divine will. A created universe is a miracle because it originates at a specific point in time and good because it is the handiwork of God. **By shifting nature into the realm of history, creation points to a God of Wonders whose care animates both the worlds of nature and history.** To be sure, the first chapter of Genesis is but a fleeting and precarious reconciliation that requires periodic renewal throughout Judaism's long subsequent history, and never more than in our day.

Bereshit 5760 (1999)

Rabbi Alexander Even-Chen

"*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth* (Gen. 1:1)." The common interpretation of this verse is that God created the world by a free choice, *ex nihilo* (Hebrew *yesh me- ayin*). That is to say, before the creation there was nothing in existence. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch regards this interpretation as fundamental to Jewish belief, because creation from nothing implies that God is not bound by anything and the world was created in an entirely new fashion.

Hirsch is taking issue here with those who claim that there was in existence a "substance" before Creation, and God actually just gave it "form." Such an act of creation is called "creation from the extant" (*yesh mi-yesh*), and it may be illustrated by the image of children playing at the beach, marking the sand into various shapes: a star, a circle... The sand is like the substance that pre-dates Creation, when God shaped that substance into different forms. **Hirsch is sharply critical of this conception of Creation, because in his view it does damage to the concept of God as omnipotent.** Moreover, if the substance of the world is primordial, then the Creator was able to shape, using the material given to work with, not a world that would be entirely good, but only the world that was best on a relative basis. "Best on a relative basis" because with the materials available, God was **unable** to make a world better than the one [which was] actually created. From Hirsch's perspective, this leads to a view of God acting under constraints. **The pre-Creation material limits God, just as a substance, such as marble or stone, limits the creative possibilities of the sculptor.**

...A different concept of creation is that of Maimonides. He presents us with the idea of "eternal creation." The first words of Genesis do not refer to an act of creation on one occasion. Instead, creation occurs at each instant. Yesterday, today, and tomorrow, God creates the world.

Maimonides suggests reading the opening of Genesis as "*At the beginning of God's creation of the heavens and the earth...*" Reading the infinitive construct "*bero*" ("creation" or "creating") instead of the past-tense verb "*bara*" ("created") allows for a continual process: God is constantly creating the world. This concept of creation has value implications as well: God bestows the world and humanity with divine favor – the Kabbalists' "overflow" - continuously. People can bring about redemption because of their ability to open up and receive that divine beneficence.

Parashat B'reishit: The Power of a Name: The Power of Naming

Rabbi Andrew Davids

Torah Quote:

Adonai God said, "It is not good for man to be alone; I will make a fitting helper for him." And Adonai God formed out of the earth (ha-adamah) all the wild beasts and all the birds of the sky and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that would be its name. And the man gave names to all the cattle and to the birds of the sky and to all the wild beasts; but for the man no fitting helper was found. (Genesis 2:18-20)

Commentary Quotes:

* "What is man, that Thou art mindful of him?" (Psalms 8:5) God answered them, "The man whom I desire to create will possess wisdom that shall exceed yours [the heavenly hosts.]" What did God do then? Assembling all the cattle, beasts, and fowl, God made them pass before them [the heavenly hosts] and asked them, "What are the names of these?" They did not know. When, however, God created man and, making them pass before him, asked him what the names of these were, he replied, "This should fittingly be called an ox; that, a lion; that, a horse; that, an ass; that, a camel; and that an eagle," as may be inferred from the text, "And the man gave names to all the cattle." Then God asked him, "And you, what shall be your name?" He answered, "Adam." God persisted, "Why?" And he explained, "Because I have been created from the ground." The Holy One, blessed be God, asked him, "And I, what is My name?" Adam replied, "Adonai." "Why?" "Because you are master over all created beings." Hence it is written, "I am Adonai, that is My name." (Isaiah 47:8) It means, "That is the name by which Adam called Me; it is the name that I have accepted for Myself; and it is the name on which I have agreed with My creatures." (Numbers Rabbah 19:3)

25

25

* "And you shall no longer be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I make you the father of a multitude of nations..." And God said to Abraham, "As for your wife Sarai, you shall not call her Sarai, but her name shall be Sarah." (Genesis 17:5,15)

* Since a number of women [in the Bible] are nameless, it is ironic that naming often appears in Genesis as a mother's prerogative. Eve, Sarah, Hagar, Rebekah, Rachel, Leah, the daughter of Shua (Judah's wife), and Tamar are all involved in the naming of their children. In a number of cases, the child is named after a prophecy or utterance made by its mother. (Jane Rachel Litman, "Themes of Genesis" in Lifecycles: Jewish Women on Biblical Themes in Contemporary Life, volume 2, edited by Debra Orenstein and Jane Rachel Litman, Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 1997)

* In adam and adamah there is an obvious play on words, a practice that the Bible shares with other ancient literatures. This should not, however, be mistaken for mere punning. Names were regarded not only as labels but also as symbols, magical keys, as it were, to the nature and essence of the given being or thing. (Ephraim A. Speiser, Genesis: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary, Anchor Bible, volume 1, 1964)

* In life, you discover that people are called by three names: One is the name the person is called by his father and mother; one is the name people call him; and one is the name he acquires for himself. The best one is the one he acquires for himself. (Tanchuma, Vayak'heil 1)

* Each of us has a name given by God and given by our parents. Each of us has a name given by our stature and our smile and given by what we wear./ Each of us has a name given by the mountains and given by our walls./ Each of us has a name given by the stars and given by our neighbors./ Each of us has a name given by our sins and given by our longing./ Each of us has a

name given by our enemies and given by our love./ Each of us has a name given by our celebrations and given by our work./ Each of us has a name given by the seasons and given by our blindness./ Each of us has a name given by the sea and given by our death. (Zelda, "Each Man Has a Name," as adapted by Marcia Falk in *The Book of Blessings*, New York: Harper Collins, 1996, p. 106ff.)

D'var Torah

God gave human beings the ability and power to name. Just as God separates light from darkness and dry land from water, this biblical text affirms that humans-created in the image of God-may seek to bring order to our chaotic and dynamic world through the process of naming. The power to name can be experienced in our everyday lives, for example, nothing grabs the attention of a misbehaving child more effectively than a parent-the bestower of the child's names-calling him by his first, middle, and last names. The rabbis caution us, however, to use the power of our voices and our words wisely. We must make certain that we use the divine gift of naming in a moral, appropriate, and thoughtful manner. We must also reject feeling that we are destined to live with and exemplify only the names given to us by others. Our tradition teaches that through our own choices and actions, each of us can name and rename ourselves. By doing so, each of us can bring honor to God, to the bestowers of our names, and to ourselves.

Bereshit 5763 (2002): "Seeing Redemption"

Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz

Making our way through Avivah Zornberg's "The Particulars of Rapture," a commentary on the Book of Exodus, we explored the many parallels between the creation of the world in Bereshit and the creation of the Israelite nation in Shemot. One of the verses pregnant with meaning that we focused our discussion on is when Moshe "saw their (the Israelites') suffering" *va'yar b'sivlotam* (Exodus 2:11). Avivah's commentary is striking: "Moses' seeing is Moses allowing himself to be affected, to suffer with those who are unexpectedly called 'his brothers' " (Zornberg, *The Particulars of Rapture*, 25). Moses' seeing is an act that imparts knowledge to him - and more importantly, a knowledge that must be acted upon. This week's parashah, Parashat Bereshit, also contains many instances of sight and knowledge - and the need to act on that knowledge. It is no coincidence that both the creation of the world and the creation of the Israelite nation involve these two acts.

Two examples, one human and the other Divine stand out as sparkling examples. First, God commands Adam that "[o]f every tree of the garden you are free to eat; but as for the tree of knowledge of good and bad, you must not eat of it; for as soon as you eat of it, you shall die" (Genesis 2:16-17). Eve later sees that the tree was good for eating and encourages Adam to eat. Rather than dying, their eyes are opened immediately; their scope of vision is broadened. Based on this sequence of events, Ramban comments that our initial warning from God should be understood as such: "[on the day that you eat] you shall realize that you are mortal. You will have to live with the knowledge that one day you will die, a burden of awareness that no other creature bears." As we, the readers see, Adam and Eve do not die, but in Ramban's sensitive reading, they are given awareness of their death. Such knowledge no doubt leads Adam and Eve and us, their descendants, to live our lives with a greater sense of value and preciousness - of each moment and every day. Sight and then acquired knowledge change our behavior.

27

27

At the close of our parashah, God gives us another example to take to heart. Successive human failures, moral and ethical, lead God to look upon his creations and pass harsh judgment. The Torah states:

The Lord saw how great was man's wickedness on earth, and how every plan devised by his mind was nothing but evil all the time. And the Lord regretted that He had made man on earth, and His heart was saddened. The Lord said, "I will blot out from the earth the men whom I created - men together with beasts, creeping things, and birds of the sky; for I regret that I made them." But Noah found favor with the Lord. (Genesis 6:5-8)

God's act of seeing leads to the disturbing knowledge that something has gone awry in the 'experiment of creation.' God cannot sit idly by as evil accrues and that which was declared to be good spoils to oblivion. God's subsequent knowledge leads to action: the destruction of absolute evil and the saving of one individual from whom life is to be regenerated.

Seeing has the capacity to change our behavior. It is, as Avivah Zornberg describes, a redemptive act that sets the stage for change - that lays the groundwork for different modes of being. The task before us is first to open our eyes - whether it be to Torah, to injustice, to goodness, to righteousness. The mere act of seeing has the potential of behavioral transformation. Far from being passive, we like Adam and Eve need to live our lives with an awareness of the preciousness of each moment; and like God, we need to intervene in the face of injustice.

May this parashah represent a new beginning - showing us the potential for sight, insight and ultimately redemption.

Shabbat Beresheet: The Gloria Steinem of Eden

Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson

It is a fact of history that all of the Rabbis of the Talmudic age were men. Actually, every Rabbi -- from antiquity to modernity -- were men until 1972, when the first woman was ordained. Similarly, in other religious and secular traditions, the male perspective has dominated almost exclusively -- to the extent that "man" was a term used to mean humanity and the pronoun "he" was considered gender-neutral.

Throughout history, the male perspective was seen as normal, while the female viewpoint was held to be particular to women (as opposed to recognizing both as distinct to their gender or both as conditioned by social factors).

Occasionally, however, recognition of the harm caused by the suppression of women peeks out from under the smothering blanket of male domination. Such a moment of insight emerges from the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

The Rabbis of the Talmudic age, sensitive and honest readers of the Torah, noticed a discrepancy between the command of God to Adam and Adam's paraphrase to Eve of God's command.

God instructs Adam, "Of the tree of knowledge of good and bad, you must not eat of it; for as soon as you eat of it, you shall die." Dutifully, Adam informs Eve of God's command. Apparently, however, he adds one small phrase. When Eve relates her husband's words to the snake, she paraphrases God's instruction as, "You shall not eat of it, nor touch it, lest you die" -- a version she must have received from her husband.

28

Just as in the children's game, "Telephone," the more people who transmit a message, the more distorted and garbled that message becomes. God-to-Adam-to-Eve-to-the-snake was apparently one layer too many.

28

The Midrash Beresheet Rabbah states that the snake "took her and thrust her against [the tree]." The snake's action forced Eve to see that, in fact, touching the tree did not cause her death, so she reasoned that there would be no harm in eating from it either. We still live with the tragic outcome.

According to Avot de-Rebbi Natan, an ancient Midrash to Pirkei Avot (The Teachings of the Sages), Eve reasoned, quite logically, that Adam had lied to her. After all, part of what he said was clearly untrue -- one could survive touching the tree, so why not survive eating from it as well? The lesson of the Midrash is quite clear: the disproportionate centrality of men and male dominance breeds disaster. Eve is not the villain in this story. While she is responsible for choosing to eat the fruit, she is also a victim of patriarchal exclusion. Adam shared his wife's responsibility in that he did not clearly communicate God's will to Eve. God is partly responsible, having spoken only to Adam, while intending to obligate Eve as well.

Invidious hierarchy among people, assigning a greater worth to one human being over another, is misguided and dangerous. The Midrash says that in those days, "Eve addressed Adam only as 'my master.'" But mastery of another person corrodes both individuals -- master and underling -- while simultaneously muting God's word.

After the expulsion from Eden, Eve stopped viewing Adam as master, moving humanity on the long and unfinished road toward true equality. Only as equals can men and women be a source of insight, support, love, and guidance to each other. Only as equals can we guide each other on the road ahead.

Parashat Breisheet 5764 (2003): "Impulsiveness and Premeditation"

Rabbi Menachem Creditor

There is a danger in feeling so familiar with something that it loses its mystery. And so, for me, the deepest way of looking at Torah has included an attempt to forget everything I know as I read - especially a Parsha like this one, one with which we are all acquainted. By both returning to the text and reading it for the first time perhaps we can discover new mysteries that, until this reading, remained hidden.

The beginning of Breisheet includes two tellings of the story of creation. If you believe God wrote the Torah, you face a challenge explaining the differences between the two versions. If you believe the Torah was written by people, you face a challenge explaining the differences between the two versions. Regardless of where the Torah came from, one difference between the two Creation narratives is clear: In the first chapter of the Torah the Creator is known as "**Elohim**" while in the second chapter of the Torah the Creator is known as "**Adonai**" or "**Adonai Elohim**." Why two versions of Creation? And why two different names for God?

We read towards the end of our Parsha, "**When men began to increase on earth and daughters were born to them, the divine beings saw how beautiful the daughters of men were and took wives from among those that pleased them** (Gen 6:1-2)." When I read those words I recall Greek myths and their tales of gods and humans procreating and creating half-breeds like Hercules and the Titans. What are these "**divine beings**"?!

The Hebrew for **divine beings** is **b'nei Elohim**, literally **children of God**. Rashi suggests that "These are princes and judges," human beings touched with divine qualities of authority. But then Rashi makes a second suggestion: "Or perhaps the divine beings are the emissaries of God who intermingled with them. Every time scripture uses the term "**Elohim**" it implies a position of power..."

In order to best understand who the **b'nei Elohim** are, we should first try to understand the term **Elohim**. Rashi's comment on Genesis 2:5, in which God is called "**Adonai Elohim**," is as follows: "Adonai is God's name. Elohim refers to God's role as judge over the universe. This is the meaning of 'Elohim' in all its occurrences in the Torah: Adonai who is Elohim."

Elohim indicates God's judging aspect, an assertion of power.

Perhaps this explains the way **Elohim** in Genesis 1 creates the first person: "**And Elohim said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. They shall rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth, and all the creeping things that creep on earth.'**" (Gen. 1:26) The very description of this creature is a being whose character is predicted and who wields authority over other things. [While I won't address the problematics of "let us," see Rabbi Sandi Eisenberg Sasso's illustrated child's book "In Our Image" for a wonderfully creative read of our verse.]

Compare that depiction of **Elohim** above with the following one from Chapter 2 of Genesis: "**Adonai Elohim formed man from the dust of the earth and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being** (Gen. 2:7)." In contrast to the narrative of Chapter 1, there is no premeditation behind the creation of humanity in this verse. It suggests perhaps a more 'instinctive' act of creation, a more 'impulsive' God. [I recommend "The Life of God as Told by Himself" by Franco Ferrucci, an inspired imaginative piece of midrash, which describes God's acts of creation as uncontrollable explosions of divine loneliness.]

The combination of images is staggering- a God who acts deliberately and a God who acts 'from the gut.' Are we talking about the same God? A famous rabbinic midrash illustrates this tension:

"Rabi Yehudah said in Rav's name: When the Holy Blessed One wished to create humanity, God created a company of ministering angels and said to them, 'Is it your desire that I create humanity?' They answered, 'Sovereign of the Universe, what will be their deeds?' 'Such and such will be their deeds,' God replied.

Thereupon the angels exclaimed: 'Sovereign of the universe, **What is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you think of him?**' (Psalm 8:5) Thereupon God stretched out God's little finger among them and consumed them with fire. The same thing happened with a second company.

The third company of angels said to God, 'Sovereign of the Universe, how did it benefit the former angels that they expressed their opposition to You? The whole world is Yours, and whatsoever You wish to do in it, do!' (Sanhedrin 38b)"

Ours is a God who feels conflict. On the one hand, thinking in advance might be a successful way of getting things accomplished. But, on the other hand, sometimes we act on our instincts regardless of our knowledge of potential consequences. **Elohim** of Genesis 1 is judicious and thoughtful and assigns humanity a role - even before the first human exists! But **Adonai** of Chapter 2 breathes life into a mound of dust without an explicit plan. Humanity is untested and yet God shares '**ruach**,' God's own **Holy Essence**, with the very first human being, birthing the potentials for both destruction and creation into an untried creature.

30

30

The Creation of humans is crucial. It determines the fate of the world. The angels had begged God not to create us with the knowledge that, along with human beauty, the world would suffer with our presence.

And yet God formed us.

The Hebrew word in Gen. 2:7 for 'form' is **VaYitzer**. The terms **Yetzer HaTov/Good Inclination** and **Yetzer HaRa/Evil Inclination** are etymologically related to this word. **Yetzer** literally means **intention**, and so I translate Gen. 2:7 as follows: "**Adonai Elohim intentionalized man from earthly dust, and breathed the breath of life into his nostrils, and man became a living being.**"

That word **VaYitzer** is a powerful term. It includes within it so much. And, if you look at the Hebrew closely, you might see that the spelling of the word is odd in our verse - there are two **yud**'s when there is normally only one. Rashi notes this strange form and writes, "The two **yud**'s in **VaYitzer** demonstrate two intentions: One intention for this world, and one for the resurrection of the dead."

We can be **b'nei Elohim**, existing in this world using only one of our **Yetzers**: the **Yetzer**, created in **Elohim's** image, that plans, and judges, and deals with 'this world,' the reality we confront on a daily basis.

Or we can learn to use the **Yetzer** breathed to us by **Adonai** as well: the **Yetzer** that, despite the reality we face, including our own deaths, allows us to dream of resurrection, to see beyond quantifiable expectations into a better world.

We can't know the future, and so perhaps we can take a chance and dream, as God did with us.

Parashat Shemot 2002/5763: "Salvation without a Name"

Rabbi Menachem Creditor

Voldemort.

If you haven't read any of the Harry Potter series, you probably don't know that Voldemort is the name of the 'bad guy.' He evokes so much fear, that the common character in the series refers to him as "he who must not be named." Calling out the name invokes the name-bearer. So too, we see Moshe's ultimate question "When I come to the Israelites and say to them 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is His name?' what shall I say to them? (Ex. 3:13)" We are slaves in Egypt at the beginning of this new book of the Torah- if we are to look towards God for salvation, shouldn't we at least know the name of our Savior?

If the phrasing of that last line bothered you, good. To give away the punchline early on, the crucial uniqueness of Judaism is the admission that we don't fully know God, or even God's true name. The Zohar teaches that the entire Torah is God's name. Classic rabbinic tradition teaches that only the Kohen Gadol, the High Priest, knew the secret 70 plus letter name of God, and only said it once a year, on Yom Kippur. Either way, Infinite or Finite, the Ultimate name is hidden from us.

God informs Moshe that the name to be used to refer to God is "Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh. (Ex. 3:14)" Despite countless attempts to translate this holy name, there remains no clear understanding as to its meaning. The new JPS translation comes closest; it uses the Hebrew- even in the English translation!

"Ehyeh" means "I will be." What is the Torah depicting God as saying? (And, by the way, an important implication of this conversation is that even our English name 'God' is not actually the Name - and so, when someone writes 'G-d' they are implying something about knowing God's full name, which we have established remains unknown.)

Look at the parallels between Moshe's encounter and Ya'akov's encounter with the mysterious being across the Yabok river: "Then the being said, "Let me go, for dawn is breaking." But Jacob answered, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." Said the other, "What is your name?" He replied, "Jacob." Said he, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed." Jacob asked, "Pray tell me your name." But the being said, "You must not ask my name!" And he took leave of him there. So Jacob named the place Peniel, meaning, "I have seen a divine being face to face, yet my life has been preserved (Gen. 32:27-30)." Jacob's name was knowable (and changeable), but the being's was not.

Names play a central role in this week's parasha, which opens up by recounting the names of Yisrael's sons, after having just recounted them in the last parasha in Genesis. The Midrash (Midrash Rabbah Shemot 1:5) interprets the re-recounting of their names as "referring to the redemption of Israel. Reuven's name reflects what written: "Seen (Ra'o)! I have seen (Ra'iti) the suffering of my nation (Ex. 3:7)!" [As for] Shimon, "And Adonai heard (Shama) their cries'..."

What we make of our names, of the names given or acquired or re-acquired, reflects the way we look at the world. Was Reuven's name a description of the past (literally, 'I have seen my son') or a hope for the future (God will see my son)? Naming things invokes specific power.

Not naming things evokes a deeper power.

What is un-namable? Only One is the Un-Named. As Ehyeh means 'I will be,' the very name presented to Moshe implies that only One will remain "Ehyeh"- even in the present.

God is the future within the present. Name that.

The Mei HaShiloach, written by Rabbi Morechai Yosef Leiner (The 'Ishbitzer'), and taught to me by the wise Rabbi Nehemia Polen interprets the verse "...The Israelites groaned from the slavery and cried out. And their cry from their slavery rose up to God (Ex. 2:23): ...this is the beginning of salvation. Once they cried out, immediately [we read] 'their cry rose up' - for until this point they had no self-reflective agitation to cry to cry out or pray. But since God wanted to save them, God set in motion within them a cry - and this is the beginning of salvation - when a person is motivated to cry out to God (Vol. 2 'Shemot')."

Notice that the Children of Israel didn't cry out to God by name. They groaned. The Ishbitzer Rebbe would teach us that their motivation to reach out of bondage and dare to dream of redemption was what got God's attention. For us, it might be a wake-up call to realize that we can recite set texts and say God or Adonai or any one of the other Names of the Infinite One, but God will hear us when we reach for the future from within the present.

Ya'akov's name is knowable, as is his nature. The being changes his name, and therefore his nature (reminiscent of the Eastern European custom of renaming an ill person to change their fate).

But God's name is unknowable, as is God's nature. To name God is to limit the infinite, but to call God- that is to tap into it.

So what is God's name?

God is the future within the present.

33

We reach for that when we remember Willy Wonka's answer to Verooka's father who asks what a 'snozberry' is. Wonka simply says:

"my dear man, we are the music makers. And we are the dreamers of dreams."

33

Yitro 5761

Rabbi Ismar Schorsch

My father had a mind that reveled in philosophy. Maimonides, Spinoza and Kant were his lifelong companions. As a kid absorbed by sports, I knew their names almost as well as those of Sid Luckman and Joe DiMaggio, though their stats were harder to come by. I often saw my father pore over an old edition of Samuel Ibn Tibbon's 13th century Hebrew translation of Maimonides' Guide for the Perplexed, written in Arabic. And in 1960 he brought a copy of Solomon Munk's mid-19th-century French translation based on the Arabic original which Munk had discovered.

I suspect my father would have preferred to see me get my doctorate in Jewish philosophy rather than Jewish history. He had a limited tolerance for the attention to detail required of serious history. His mind soared to contemplate ultimate questions; mine enjoyed grappling with the minutia of a fragmented past. When we came to speak of Judaism in his later years, we would usually meet on his turf.

In truth, however, theology and history in Judaism are inseparable. It requires a convergence of both domains to appreciate the revolution that the Torah effected with its new conception of God. What is the nature of the deity who issues the Ten Commandments which we read this Shabbat? My father would have liked that question. As for my answer, I formulated it, alas, long after he was gone.

The key to the Decalogue is its preamble: "I'm the Lord your God who brought you out of the Land of Egypt, the house of bondage (Exodus 20:2)." By this point in the narrative that statement seems little more than a prosaic summary of what is well known. Israel would never have been sprung from slavery without the remarkable intervention of God. Our obligation to heed the commandments to come is grounded in that indebtedness.

God's claim on our loyalty rests on the miracle of the Exodus.

But there is more at stake here than divine self-interest, a demand for repayment. The preamble heralds a radical shift in the locus of God's presence. The God of Israel is to be found in the course of history and not the contours of nature. The world of polytheism rejected by the Torah personified natural phenomena into individual deities with specific functions -- Baal as the god of rain, Astarte, the goddess of the evening star and Poseidon, the god of the sea. Because the underlying phenomena remained the same, the gods became transmutable: to enter another nation's pantheon required no more than a change of name.

The God of Israel, in contrast, is the God of history who presides over nature as well as human events. This is the force of the fourth commandment which proclaims God as the author of creation. In observing Shabbat, we acknowledge creation as an act of history executed by a sovereign without bounds. All that exists derives from a single and unfathomable divine being. Nature, however, enchants us into thinking of multiple seats of power, none supreme and all ensnared by the same inexorable, impersonal fate that governs human destiny.

The gods of nature are immanent; the God of history is transcendent. The essence of biblical monotheism is less about numbers than power. God is omnipotent, beyond fate and totally free. The Torah shares an elaborate sacrificial system with its non-monotheistic neighbors, but its meaning has been altered. Sacrifices are no longer conceived of as nutrients for the divine to be eaten in consort with the humans who offer them. When Jethro joins Moses, Aaron and the elders of Israel in a burnt offering, the Torah stipulates

that it was consumed in a festive meal "before God," not with God (Exodus 18:12). The change in preposition hints at the upheaval in theology.

Unlike sacrifices, magic of all sorts is repudiated by the Torah. God is not susceptible to coercion. Magic propitiated because it provided the gods with a measure of human assistance against the common, overriding danger of fate. Magic was too integral a part of idolatry to be redeemed.

Nature also was regarded with deep suspicion and reserve. As the seed bed for idolatry, that is, revering something less than the ultimate source of all being, nature could only divert and confuse. It was surely not home to other deities. The prohibition against graven images excluded the world of nature from the realm of the holy. To associate God with any natural form would soon sever the symbol from what it stood for, ending up in worship of the symbol itself. The genuine experience of God did not lie in gazing at the sun or the stars, but in recalling the miracles which punctuated the emergence of Israel into nationhood.

Hence the God behind the Exodus is the God beyond nature. History is the realm in which the wonders of God are to be witnessed. It is no accident that the Hebrew words for wonder (peleh, nifla'ot) in the Tanakh generally refer to God's interventions in history rather than handiwork in nature. In the Song at the Sea, which celebrates the failure of Pharaoh to thwart the Exodus, Moses exults: "Who is like You, O Lord, among the celestials; who is like You, majestic in holiness, awesome in splendor, working wonders (oseh feleh) (Exodus 15:11)." Or in Psalm 78:11-12 and Psalm 98:1 the wonders invoked are clearly divine acts of beneficence for Israel.

To be effective over time, miracles must be remembered. Without memory, faith will wane. Psalm 78 is a bitter poetic rendering of the miracles wrought by God for Israel at the Exodus and in the wilderness. Yet, they are quickly forgotten, bringing Israel to spurn God's commandments. Eruptions of divine frustration and punishment follow human infidelity.

Beginning with Shabbat, the holy days are turned into moments of historical commemoration to reinforce memory. As Shabbat recalls creation, Pesach recounts the Exodus, Sukkot, survival in the wilderness, and Shavuot, eventually, the giving of the Torah at Sinai. The natural origins of these harvest festivals are devalued. Similarly, the synagogue liturgy become freighted with historical references: the daily recitation of the Song at the Sea and the frequent mention of the Exodus. The memory of past instances of divine compassion nurtures the hope for the appearance of others. History encapsulates the promise of redemption.

In sum, the Decalogue offers a lens on the deep structure of biblical monotheism and of later Judaism, indeed of Christianity and Islam as well. With the rejection of nature as the matrix for experiencing the divine, history served to encompass the encounters of Jews with a Supreme Being of cosmic and ethical proportions. Remarkably, it is a shift that has survived the ravages of exile, persecution and even the Holocaust.

Parashat Mishpatim - Shabbat Shekalim: *Spirituality in the Everyday*

Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson

In seeking spiritual highs, people often turn to moments of overwhelming emotion, or to exotic locations. Our culture perceives spirituality as a jolting transformation -- an overwhelming sense of God's presence that is different than ordinary experience. Such moments certainly occur in biblical and rabbinic Judaism as well.

Abraham in the Covenant of the Pieces, or the Jewish people at Sinai, are but two examples of transforming moments in time. But such moments remain the exceptions. The incessant need to experience spiritual peaks can represent a hedonism no less compulsive and damaging than the hedonism sought in more physical sources of pleasure. Periodic peaks are useful to reinvigorate, to reorient, or to rededicate. In context, they are an essential part of Jewish life. But we do not live on the peaks -- the air is too thin, the winds too brisk to sustain human life, family and community. So we need a religious orientation that sustains us on the plains -- amid concerns for security, education and relationship. After the revelatory moment passes, after the high is over, then life begins. And there, too, Judaism must dwell.

Parshat Mishpatim is precisely that kind of spirituality, teaching us to look for God, not with closed eyes, but with hands engaged; not with a mantra, but with involvement.

We find God in the world by making the world more Godly -- through labor, compassion and justice. Parshat Mishpatim is a collection of laws pertaining to living every day -- laws of marriage, employment, lost property, integrity and financial practices.

Why the focus on mundane detail? Judaism has always insisted on translating philosophy into action. Ideology without action quickly becomes anemic and self-serving. Action without conviction becomes mechanistic and insincere. The balance between deed and creed is the realm of 'mitzvah' -- where God's will and human integrity meet in practice.

The balance of today's Torah portion is the insistence that our deepest convictions find articulation not just in words but in deeds, not just in strong feeling, but in cooperative behavior. By training ourselves to perform 'mitzvot,' we school ourselves anew in the values and perspectives of Judaism. We transfer an aspect of the original peak experience into the remotest aspects of our daily lives -- a spark from the original flame. With the light of those sparks, we warm ourselves and our fellow human beings. We illumine our lifelong journey, invigorating ourselves, our traditions and our God.

Parashat Vayakhel-Pekudei - Shabbat HaChodesh

Rabbi Lewis Warshauer

The Book of Exodus ends on a note of triumph. The liberation from Egypt was followed by the giving of Torah and the building and dedication of the Tabernacle. God forgives the Israelites for their sin with the golden calf - and, in the closing lines of the book, God's presence, in the form of a cloud, comes to rest upon the Tabernacle. Nahmanides, in his closing comment on this, the second book of the Torah, gives it the title: the book of redemption.

Bahya ben Asher (13th Cent., Spain) goes further and explains that the settling of God's presence among the Israelites was but a foretaste of the future:

"If, at the first redemption we loved our King, whose sweet loving is better than wine, and Who appeared to us in His glory by the vision of our eyes, through the screen of a clouds will it not be, in time to come, that God shall be realized to us even more? -- His glory, eye to eye, with no screen between us nor cloud to be seen, as the prophet says: " Hark! Your watchmen raise their voice, as they shout for joy; for every eye shall behold the Lord's return to Zion.1 (Isaiah 52:8)"

Bahya's message seems discordant after Purim - the holiday that features a book in which God is not just screened off, but fails to appear at all. Many Jews are Megillah JewsPthat is, they believe that redemption is a human process, coming when people make it come, as Esther and Mordechai did. God is hidden or absent. This is also the ideology of secular Zionism. Yet, there are also Jews who are Haggadah Jews- they understand redemption as the Haggadah does - a process that began with God's saving the Israelites from Egypt and will culminate in the ultimate salvation of their descendants in messianic times.

On closer examination, though, one can, and indeed should, be both a Megillah Jew and a Haggadah Jew. Looking forward to a divine redemption at the end of days does not exclude taking practical steps today for the benefit of Jews and Judaism. Emphasizing the need for human action, and learning to live in a world where God has no visible presence, does not exclude hope for a time when the screen will rise, the cloud will lift, and God will be far nearer even than in days of old.

Parashat Emor 2003/5763: "What's Holy and What's Not"

Rabbi Menachem Creditor

This week's "Tisch" will cross the line from what is considered "safe" for a rabbi to talk about into a more intense and sensitive area. We'll begin with some quotes from this week's Parasha and use them as grounding texts for the exploration to follow.

In Leviticus 21:6 we read, regarding the kohanim/priests, "They shall be holy (Kedoshim Yihiyu) to their God and not profane (Lo Yechalelu) the name of their God; for they offer Adonai's offerings by fire, the food of their God, and so must be holy." Similar language is found in Leviticus 22:32 where we read, regarding the Israelite people as a whole, "You shall not profane My holy name (Techalelu), that I may be sanctified (VeNikdashti) in the midst of the Israelite people—I, Adonai, who sanctifies you..."

[It is interesting to note that that word, "VeNikdashti" only appears once in the Chumash and four times in the Book of Ezekiel—a powerful word indeed!]

These words remind us of the famous language of Parashat Kedoshim, where we read, "You shall be holy (Kedoshim Yihiyu), for I, Adonai your God, am holy... (Lev. 19:2)." Part of our discussion will be the precise meaning of the word "Kadosh." We usually translate it as "holy," but I feel that our translation is missing a magnitude another English word might bring. But for now, let's recognize a significant difference in the language of our week's verses. We are prohibited from being the opposite of Kadosh. The Hebrew word for the opposite of Kadosh is "Chol," what Emil Durkheim and Max Weber (among others) call "the profane." In the 1st blessing of Havdalah, we bless God for being "HaMavdil Bein Kodesh LeChol / the One who makes the difference between Kodesh and Chol."

38

And so, whatever it means to be Kadosh, it is the difference between God's involvement and God's non-involvement. [If I had written "it is the difference between God's Presence and God's absence" I imagine that some readers would react more strongly, and so I replaced this phrase with a gentler one.]

38

Let's look at the word "Kadosh." Even if we translate it as "holy" it remains ambiguous. How does a person actualize holiness? While there are numerous descriptions within our Parasha of staying away from improper relationships, the terms Kadosh and Chol have far-reaching implications in our day-to-day activities. And I believe that the way to transform terms into actions is to find the accurate meaning of the command.

Rashi on Lev. 1:1 translates Kadosh as "separate" – ie., the command to be Kadosh is a command to be distinct from others. We keep Kosher in order to be different, and therefore identifiable (to others and to ourselves). Interestingly enough, Kadosh is also used in the formula by which a husband and wife become connected under the Chuppah – the sentence is "Harei At Mekudeshet Li/Now you are consecrated to me." The same word that indicates separateness to Rashi points to intimate connection in our wedding ceremonies.

The most satisfying translation of "Kadosh" I've heard comes from Rabbi Yitz Greenberg who teaches that the term "Kadosh" means "intense." The command to be Kadosh is a command to live an intense life. A powerful "proof" for this meaning is the description of God we recite during the Amidah – we say God is "Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh," - three times intensity! God, according to this interpretation, can be understood as the most intense experience there is. And we are Godly when we imbue acts with intensity, when we elevate an act to a higher level, reaching towards the Source of holiness/intensity.

I spent some time with my congregation this past Shabbat looking for the antonym of Kadosh. I

asked for opinions and received words like “impure,” “profane,” “wrong,” “ignorant,” and “ordinary.” And the more we discussed, the more convinced I was that the difference between Kodesh and Chol (which, in my mind, remain un-translatable) is God. God is the difference between Kodesh and Chol, and the definition of an act performed with Kedusha is the do'er's intention (kavannah) to connect with God.

So here's where the conversation gets ticklish: If the difference between an act being Kadosh or Chol is the intensity of the do'er's mindset, then we are in a precarious position vis a vis religious structure. Intention can take any form - why participate in Jewish ritual if any act can be holy? And furthermore, there are intensely bad things in this world, and so I place a caveat on the definition: Kedusha can only be found in that which creates, not within that which destroys. Judaism offers one path towards creation and healing amooog - it is the individuals right to choose their own path. We have a vision of truth that recognizes the validity of other paths towards the Infinite. Choosing Judaism and its structures is a way to God. (I know that definition is subjective, and I would look forward to a passionate discourse on TheTisch Discussion List! email tisch_discussion@yahoogroups.com)

Let's apply our definition of Kodesh and Chol to some everyday things, beginning with safer ideas and ending in more murky territory.

- 1) A flame can be used to destroy. Or it can be connected to God by sanctifying moments in time.
- 2) A hand can hang at a person's side. Or it can be used as a weapon. Or it can be connected to God by elevating someone else's life.
- 3) A piece of cloth can be used as a rag. Or it can clothe someone in need. Or it can be connected to God by being elevated into a Tallit.
- 4) A car can be an ordinary thing. Or it can be a vehicle of connection to God. Not the obvious use of driving someone to the doctor, a mitzvah beyond compare, but a more common usage: Driving to shul/

I'll say it in one sentence: If you drive to shul on Shabbat or a holiday, then the key that starts the ignition should be no different in your heart than the tallit you will put on once you arrive. My synagogue has made a statement about driving to shul on Shabbat and Holidays by opening its parking lot for those days. Recognize, as I continue, that this is a drasha about an idea. It's implications into the realm of Halachah (Jewish Law) are unmistakable, but I approach my holy community with the goal of elevating what is. If a congregant were to ask me, as they were going to buy a home, what should influence their decision, I would indicate that they should live within walking distance of the shul and within the eruv. But I don't get that question. And, truth be told, I don't get asked about driving to shul either.

But that doesn't mean that driving to shul doesn't give people feelings of guilt or wrongness – or the feeling that they are stepping into Chol when they should be connecting to Kedusha.

[I'm going to use the term “I” in this paragraph so as to not point at anyone or imply judgment upon anyone.] If I believe that I am supposed to go to shul, and I have no choice but to drive (a subjective independent decision), then what is the act of driving? What is the act of placing the key into the ignition? A step towards Jewish community and a step towards God! What is the act of placing a tallit upon my shoulders? A step towards community and a step towards God! What's the difference? The fact that we haven't focused all our acts equally. We haven't imbued Chol acts with the intensity of Kedusha!

I was lovingly and respectfully confronted by a congregant after I delivered this drasha, who said,

"I don't agree" and proceeded to tell me that he drives to shul every Shabbat, but that he isn't a pious person. I heard where he was coming from and tried to show him how he appears in my eyes – he comes to shul every Shabbat! He davens! He gives of his spirit and love to children! He knows the words of Tefillah! He is a "connector" for others who are beginning their spiritual paths!

What is the definition of piety in my mind – connection to God.

This is a difficult topic for a Conservative Rabbi who does not drive to shul on Shabbat, but it is crucial. How can I look at a congregation of holy people gathered together to celebrate or comfort or learn and see anything other than a place where "Nikdashti," where God is made even more intense?

"Worshipping a Movement or Seeking Truth?"

Rabbi Menachem Creditor
In memory of Ralph Dubin z"l

Liz, Ariel, and I took a wonderful day trip to New York where, besides, visiting family and friends, we spent some time at the Westbeth Gallery in Greenwich Village viewing a retrospective of work by Ralph Dubin, my great uncle and a complicated artist. Inspired by his ideas, I'd like to deviate from the traditional "Tisch" model of parsha-based and holiday-based Divrei Torah and share some thoughts about Jewish belief and practice in general. Inasmuch as this will be a public digestion of profound art, it will also be, in part, a reaction to some dear friends' recent questions about what it means to me to live life as a liberal observant Jew.

I pose a specific question in order to keep the focus of discussion sharp, and, in good talmudic fashion, I offer my own answer (feel free to disagree and share your thoughts with me. Should you wish, we can put together a symposium of 'tisch'-subscribers and distribute it to the list):

Question: Should Jewish observance be compromised when we feel personal conflict?

Answer: There are aspects of life that conflict. For instance, any change that a person chooses might make her peers (who might or might not have chosen that same direction of change) feel that their friend has decided that their life choices are now inadequate. How many times does a newly observant person face ridicule from friends who don't value ritual growth? And, equally important, how many times do people who are invested in patterns of observance deride those who choose to adapt ritual into new patterns?

Just think of someone who's chosen a ritual to explore (Kashrut, Shabbat, Tzitzit) and the resentment 'outsiders' naturally feel ("What do you mean you won't come out with us just because it's Friday night? Do you think we're sinners?"). Now consider an observant circle judging someone who is weighing the halakhic validity of non-certified cheese (I know the example is pedantic, but it's one that comes up again and again and becomes ridiculously divisive).

The illustrations I offer are opposite examples of a similar experience: "Judging Another Person for their Practice." It is worth sketching the illustrations so that we can say the following: Individuals making their religious choices are the only ones who have the right to decide their own legitimacy. Ultimately, the consequences of their decisions are between them and God. We dare not step on God's 'toes' in that relationship.

And so I ask a more refined version of our question: Can the structures of Judaism bend due to personal need?

Here is an adaptation of a real situation: A recently married couple decides to keep kosher. They find a community that shares their perspective on Kashrut and supports the couple's religious growth in any number of ways. When the couple's parents come to visit, they want to go out to eat and suggest a non-kosher restaurant. The couple explains their decision to keep kosher and now face their hurt and rejected-feeling parents. They come to me, their rabbi, and say, "What do we do? We need to know whether or not we can break the rules to share time with and not offend our parents."

If I had posed that situation with a slight variation, namely that the eating is to be done in the parents' kitchen (which is not kosher), I would offer the answer I heard from Rabbi Doniel Hartman in Israel, "It is a mitzvah to eat in your parents' kitchen." To return to a parent's home and refuse to eat is to brand them 'treif,' an idea I find false ideologically.

Parents are transmitters of tradition equal to any code. They are not, cannot be 'treif' by virtue of their children's changed perspectives. The question is not a matter of turf- it is a matter of negotiating boundaries. When I make religious choices differently than someone else, how can we manage to come together without casting judgment on the other? This conversation all too often becomes a question of "Who decides what is authentic and legitimate Judaism?" It might more appropriately be called, "How do our personal relationships with God interact?"

I offer this advice to those seeking meeting points for differing interpretations of Jewish life:

1) Recognize, as my teacher Paula Mack Drill instructed me, that every person comes from their own point of truth.

People do not intend to hurt other people. I refuse to believe that a human being can be evil at their core because at our cores lies God, and I reject the concept that God is evil. And so, when the issue is one of different approaches to life, the key is to keep in mind that we are trying to approach life. Wouldn't it be easier if parents could view their children's independent choices as attempts to lead meaningful lives?

By the way, I would also share (but not impose) the following thought: Even God has a point of truth, and so a deeper way of dealing with God while witnessing badness in this world is to regard God as coming from a point of truth with no intention to hurt. We (including God) do not hurt intentionally; we try to connect and communicate. Sometimes that communication hurts, but if we hold onto the idea that we are just trying to connect, those points of tension might yield illumination and love.

2) Explore your own approaches to religious life.

If you experience tension when confronted with a different version of Judaism, think about this: Is your discomfort with the person in front of you, or are you not completely satisfied with your own lifestyle choices? In my experience, children who continuously fight against their parents' perspectives eventually reach the crucible of self-definition. And parents (wishing to have healthy relationships with their adult children) who rail against their children's differing perspectives eventually come to the realization that their children's choices are not in their (the parents') control. In the end, all we can control are our own choices. And so I pose the following challenge: Do we choose to love other people and do we choose to respect their individual experiences of God in this world?

What I've written until this point deals with the issue of observance confronting different observance, but I'll entertain the implied question that naturally follows: Does 'tradition' mean that which is handed to us?

Worded differently, "When personal needs come into conflict with established practice, must personal need always bend?"

My personal answer is no. We must be careful to distinguish between personal "want" and personal "need," so as not to live lives of convenience instead of lives of meaning. The ultimate goal of Judaism is to live a life of intensity and growth. There is no objective approach to God, and so I lovingly offer my friends the following answer:

Halacha offers Jews a chance at interacting with the ultimate reality. And so, the experience of Halacha is not real if it ignores other parts of reality. Rules and customs have beauty and must be treated as partners in a dialogue. Would I reject a person because we disagree strongly? Of course not. So too with Jewish tradition: I do not reject structures when I disagree with their particulars. I bring them into a dialogue and deal with questions like: "How can I keep kosher in a

restaurant where non-kosher foods are served?" "How can I find a way to eat in my parents' kitchen?" "How can I share my Shabbat with friends who do not?" Any serious model of Jewish life finds expression in a particular set of behaviors. And between these differing models of Jewish life we must make sure that there remains enough space for God.

I offer as a closing thought a quote from my great uncle Ralph Dubin, whose art encompassed different points of truth. "My involvement is with the binding and unification of sciences, history, and art into a painting - the structure of forms and colors that not only is personal but conveys the mystery of the unconscious. These forms exist in an aura of internal history that evokes the power of the primitive into the dynamic present. The human element is infinite."

May we all gain a deep sense of our own form and recognize how bound we are, through the forms of others, to the Infinite.

A Reflection on Judaism and Homosexuality

© 2003 Rabbi Menachem Creditor

In honor of Reb Jeremy Gordon's Senior Sermon and the good work of Keshet JTS

[Introduction]

There is, within our Jewish communities, substantial debate about the status of homosexuality and Judaism. I participate, as a Conservative rabbi, in several forums of discussion with people who advocate passionately on both sides of the issue.

For the purpose of this piece I'd like to anonymously quote two statements I've confronted and then share my thoughts.

I am rabbi who believes that the time has come to ritually recognize same-gender unions and change the status of homosexual physical intimacy within traditional Jewish law, and so I ask you to remember that there are those who disagree with my positions. I do not ask you to agree with me. But I do hope that we can look each other in the eyes and talk to each other - even as we struggle.

My influences on this issue include the film "Trembling Before G-d," (by Sandi Simcha Dubowski) about Orthodox Gay and Lesbian Jews, the book "A Gay Synagogue in New York," (by Moshe Shokeid) about the Greenwich Village shul Congregation Bet Simchat Torah, the teachings of Rabbi Jeremy Kalmonosky of Anshe Chesed in Manhattan, and my interactions with Keshet JTS, a student-based advocacy group at the Jewish Theological Seminary (www.keshetjts.org).

[Quote #1:]

"They say that Judaism has a place for almost everything in life. Perhaps this is its place for celibacy. Perhaps that is the ultimate answer for the "hard-wired" homosexual, whose homosexuality is so ingrained, perhaps even genetically fixed, that no possibility of heterosexual relationship remains possible. Perhaps God, for reasons known only to Godself, decided that this particular person's test in this world was to remain celibate, rather than indulge a forbidden passion. It is indeed a terrible fate, but many people are born into terrible fates, some of which can be improved upon but some of which cannot."

[My Response]

The question might be re-phrased as such: "Did God, who created gay and lesbian people, prohibit them from being physically intimate and 'challenge' them to a life of celibacy?"

NO! How can we believe in a God who intentionally creates a tortuous life for a human being? This is a picture of a cruel God whose purposes ignore individual suffering - in advance! It would already be a troubling thing to believe that God condemns a phenomenon once it appears, but if we begin by assuming that God created "hard-wired" gay and lesbian people AND prohibited them to be who they were created to be, then we are stuck with a theology that damns God. And I deny that understanding.

By the way, this perspective is part of a "big-picture" approach to God and Creation to which I subscribe. I reject the concept that God created handicapped people in order to demonstrate that we all are fragile in one way or another. I believe that God doesn't control fate and "allow" Holocausts to happen so that Jewish states can be born.

I believe that God created us and is present in our lives without controlling the details. I believe that the world and we are products of a Divine Cry of Loneliness, and that the Cry resulted in unpredictable ways, even for God. And if humanity was unquantified before God's act of creation,

then our downfalls and deformities and successes and sexual orientations and futures and lives are NOT part of a larger pre-determined plan.

I believe in a God who cares. My soul knows that sometimes 'coincidences' are intended holy encounters. I know God was holding my wife's hand with me when our daughter was born.

But to make God the cause of everything is to accuse God of all the pain that exists along with all the beauty. My theology is based on my learning from text, tradition, and the Torah of a lived life. I see God in constructive experiences, not as Cause, but as Joyful Celebrant. I see God in painful experiences, not as Cause, but as Sharing Presence.

[Quote #2:]

"The film [Trembling Before G-d] refuses to allow for the possibility that men and women with homosexual predilections might - with great effort, to be sure - achieve successful and happy marriages to members of the opposite sex. Such change is more common than most people realize. ... The film's attitude, which is better summed up by one of its subjects, Rabbi Steve Greenberg, billed as "the first openly gay Orthodox rabbi." Addressing the Torah's strong prohibition of male homosexual acts, he suggests to the camera, without elaboration: "There are other ways of reading the Torah." What Rabbi Greenberg apparently believes is that elements of the Jewish religious tradition are negotiable, that the Torah, like a Hollywood script, can be sent back for a rewrite. That approach can be called many things, but "Orthodox" is not among them."

[My Response]

There are two issues being raised, one of them in common with Quote #1. (**Question 1**) "Is there a treatment for homosexuality?" (**Question 2**) "Can Orthodox Judaism change its approach to homosexuality?"

45

45

(**Response 1**) The issue of the nature of homosexual orientation is far too complicated for me to address in this paper. A Google search for the terms "nature, nurture, homosexual, orientation" turns up at least 2,500 web-sites. I simply believe that sexual orientation is innate. I have no scientific or statistical proof. All I have are Jewish friends who are gay and lesbian. And I don't think the struggles they endure are based on choices they made or conditions they have. I'm not gay, and so I can't ever know what it is to be gay.

As to finding a "treatment" for being gay or lesbian: I, as a father, as a husband, as a human being, as a God and person loving, observant Jew, believe that God created gay and lesbian people. Treatment is for a disease, not for the constructive impulse that brings two committed and loving people together.

(**Response 2**) An out-of-the-closet gay man cannot attend an Orthodox rabbinical school, as is the current admissions policy at all Conservative rabbinical schools. Rabbi Steve Greenberg was ordained at Yeshiva University, a mainstream Orthodox school, and years later came out. The author of our quote calls into question Greenberg's Orthodoxy. Is Rabbi Greenberg no longer Orthodox if he pushes the envelope in this matter? And, for me, the question is not academic. As a rabbi invested in a Conservative Jewish community that constantly struggles with "Tradition and Change," I am deeply concerned with the ways in which we create boundaries.

But perhaps Orthodoxy cannot respond to the question of homosexuality. Perhaps, by coming out of the closet, Rabbi Greenberg wrote himself out of his community. Orthodoxy literally means "straight line." I cherish the religious philosophy of my community, and embrace the responsibility we share: to navigate curvy lines while remaining true to God. I pray that gay and lesbian Orthodox Jews find places of comfort and that Orthodox communities do everything in their power

to be flexible and inclusive.

I think that within the next few years, the Conservative Movement will re-address their stance, and the rabbinical schools will follow with a change in admissions policy. The foundation of the Conservative Movement is the understanding that change IS traditional. We always ask questions about the "timing of change" and the "how much to change" and "who has the authority to change" and "aren't we on a slippery slope if we change." But, ultimately, change happens within the Conservative Movement. Our challenge is to embrace change and foster its acceptance in the hallways of our synagogues and institutions, which sometimes forget the spiritual beauty that results from a weave of innovation and heritage.

[Conclusion]

I am biased in my perspective. There are arguments on both sides. As a liberal religious person, I can't claim exclusive rights to knowing God's will. But I can claim, with all of my soul, that the Judaism I teach recognizes the spiritual bond two adults can share. There are new definitions of family to be grappled with. There are secular legal issues we face. But, ultimately, I believe that God is "infinite enough" to include the love of men and men and women and women.

Parashat BeMidbar 2003/5763: "Waiting"

Rabbi Menachem Creditor

Celebrating the newest addition to the Ginian Family

This week we begin the fourth book of the Chumash. Its Hebrew title "BeMidbar/In the Wilderness" has dramatically different connotations from its English counterpart, "Numbers." Numbers have always been scary to me, and a constant barrage of numbers is the reason I don't do my own taxes. The core of this week's Parasha is a census, first of the people, and then of the Levites. A long counting exercise, similar to the mathematician who arrives at work looking ragged. She explains that she couldn't fall asleep, and so she began counting sheep until she realized she made a mistake in her counting and stayed up all night finding the mistake!

And so, for the sake of a successful resumption of the narrative mostly abandoned since the end of Shemot/Exodus, let's begin with a look at the concept of Wilderness. The most famous analysis of a wilderness is T.S. Elliot's "The Wasteland," in which we read:

"What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water. (Part 1: Burial of the Dead)"

The wasteland is a desert, a parched and dead place. Nothing grows there, and we wouldn't assume that life could begin there. We know the stories of the Israelites begging for water, and then for food, and then for meat, which were responded to (according to the Torah or the Midrash) by water from the rock, Miriam's well, the manna, and the birds that descended en masse to the ground. We might assume, from these stories, that the only way to bring life-energy to the desert is a miracle.

I heard a review from Debbie Astor, a friend and teacher of mine, of an article that appeared recently in *Cook's Illustrated* written by *CI* editor-in-chief Chris Kimbel who wrote of the experience of fishing with his daughter over a number of hours. His daughter repeatedly tried and didn't come with anything, feeling a tug here and there. By the end of the fishing expedition, she did catch something - a fish barely worth mentioning. Kimbel points to the experience of waiting, and wonders whether or not the conventional approach to waiting as a difficult activity is misdirecting. Kimbel himself recently maintained constant contact with NBC journalist David Bloom during the latter's time covering the war. Bloom died at the age of 39 (of natural causes) while in Iraq, while Kimbel, his dear friend, had been hopefully waiting daily for their reunion at the end of the conflict.

Kimbel's experience of waiting for his friend's return from the desert included no resolution. What is the process of waiting, Kimbel asks? It is a process that doesn't necessarily lead to a desired result - perhaps not to any result at all. But there are countless moments of waiting that go by. How does the "wait-er" experience those moments? In a torrent of emptiness? With growing anxiety? Kimbel dares to find redemptive moments in the process of waiting.

The Midbar/Desert of our ancestors' journeys was not only a place of parched earth - it was also the setting for our wedding to God at Sinai.

The Prophet Jeremiah re-tells the story of the Midbar through God's 'eyes': "I remember you, the devotion of your youth, the love like a bride, when you followed me in the wilderness, into an un-sown land. (Jer. 2:2)"

The Israelites, Jeremiah's ancestors, were rebuked by Moses at the end of their sojourn in the Midbar that "You have seen all that the Lord did before your very eyes in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his officers and to his whole country: the wondrous feat that you saw with your own eyes, those prodigious signs and marvels. Yet to this day Adonai has not given you a mind to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear. (Deut. 29:1-3)"

What has the space between Jeremiah's perceptions and Moses' experiences been filled with to so radically re-interpret the wild experience of the Midbar? Time.

Jeremiah can look back and see, despite his own time's painful tribulations, that the relationship with God needed time. Rabbi Ismar Schorsch notes that the rabbis of the Talmud knew this as well: "[Rabba taught that] it takes some forty years for a student to wholly grasp the meaning of his or her teacher (BT *Avodah Zarah* 7b)."

Moses had the intense role of being student to God, teacher to a burgeoning nation, and witness to a slave-generation's death and a free-people's birth. So much time had passed, and yet Moses spoke to the new generation with the weight of the old. So much waiting, and yet he feared that the younger Israelites would lack the ability to learn successfully from God.

Jeremiah had a later perspective, and looked back to the honeymoon of the Midbar, when we followed our Heavenly Spouse through uncharted territories, going boldly where no one in their right mind would go. But we weren't in our right minds, says Jeremiah. We were in love.

So what is the Midbar, and how can the act of waiting inform our answer?

Simply stated, the Midbar is an un-sown land. We made it our home for 40 years. Whether we remember the experience as one of newlywed excitement or barrenness is up to the way you retell the story yourself.

Naso: Longing to see God's 'face'

Dr. Neil Gillman

God has a face. That seems to be the implication of the latter two blessings of the kohanim (priests) which we read this week, and which, together with the Shema and the Decalogue, are arguably the most often quoted passages in the entire Torah.

These two blessings read: "May God's face shine upon you and be gracious to you" and "May God lift God's countenance upon you and grant you peace." In both cases, the Hebrew reads panav, literally, God's "face."

Of course, God does not really have a face. When applied to God, the notion of God's face has to be understood as metaphorical - as are the other references to God's facial features implied in the notion that God "sees," "hears," "speaks," and even, in the Noah story, "smells." These are all anthropomorphisms, literally, the attribution of human forms to God.

But the more expansive notion that God has a face suggests a different set of associations. Think of what we experience when we see another person's face.

First, the face confers identity. When we see a person's face, we recognize what makes that person different from other people. To look a person in the face is also to enter into a relationship with that person.

Second, the face reflects feelings. The face carries the smile or the frown, which betrays whether that person is pleased or angry or concerned for us.

There are other biblical texts which refer to God's face. One instance is the various references to God's particular relationship to Moses. In Exodus 34:17-23, Moses asks to behold God's "presence." But God responds that Moses may see God's "back," but not God's "face," for "man may not see Me and live."

Note here that seeing God's "face" is the same as seeing "Me." But later, after Moses' death, the Torah tells us that Moses was distinctive among the prophets because in contrast to the other prophets, "...the Lord singled him out, face to face." (Deuteronomy 34:10)

The tension between these two texts reflects the ambiguity of any human being's relationship to God. In the first of these passages, Moses wants to be reassured of God's continuing concern for Israel; the context of the passage is the golden calf episode. Here God's response is decidedly ambiguous. But the second passage reflects the unique kind of intimacy that characterized God's relation to Moses himself. To be "face to face" with another person is to have that kind of intense interpersonal relation which Martin Buber was later to call an "I-Thou" relationship.

Another reference is to a phrase that appears many times in Torah and in prophetic texts, the claim that God "will hide God's face" either from Israel, or from an individual. Frequently, God's hiding of the face is an expression of God's anger at Israel's sinfulness.

The hiding of God's face indicates God's absence, the void left by a dramatic break in the relationship with God. That sense of God's sudden, inexplicable absence from our lives is also familiar to every believer.

Finally, the two references to God's face in the blessings of the Kohanim should be understood as the very obverse of God's hidden face. We are promised that God will look at us, will relate to us and deal favorably with us; and in the last blessing, that God will grant us peace, harmony, contentment, wholeness.

It is then easy to understand why we recite this passage as frequently as we do. It expresses God's ultimate blessing.

Parashat Korah 5762

Rabbi Matt Berkowitz

The Korah narrative which is the signature tale of this week's parashah is marked by a rebellious beginning and a hopeful ending. Korah, the great grandson of Levi, and his cohorts challenge the leadership of Moses and Aaron declaring, "For all the community are holy, all of them, and the Lord is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourselves above the Lord's congregation?" Moses falls on his face in despair and puts these rebels to the test commanding, "You, Korah and all your band, take fire pans, and tomorrow put fire in them and lay incense on them before the Lord. Then the man whom the Lord chooses, he shall be the holy one. You have gone too far sons of Levi!" (Numbers 16:6-7)

After Korah's allies, Dathan and Aviram refuse to appear before Moses, the trial goes forward and ultimately, the earth swallows these evildoers, a fire goes forth from God and consumes the two hundred and fifty men who were offering incense. What is so surprising to us as readers is not the substance of the story but the footnote which follows this dramatic narrative. God commands Moses: "remove the fire pans of those who have sinned . . . and let them be made as hammered sheets as plating for the altar - for once they have been used for offering to the Lord, they have become sacred - and let them serve as a warning to the people of Israel" (Numbers 17:3). Why would objects used for such dubious purposes be incorporated into the sacred altar which brings one closer to God?

Ramban, Rabbi Moshe Ben Nahman (1194-1270), a prolific Spanish bible commentator sheds light on this question. Specifically, Ramban provides two compelling answers. First, he argues that these fire pans were holy by virtue of Moses. It was a human act, that is to say, Moses' command to use these fire pans for holy ends (seeking a divine response) that sanctifies these objects and makes them worthy for incorporation into the altar. Because Moses sought a sign from God, the pans were sanctified and so, needed to be used for another holy purpose. Ramban's second interpretation is just as fascinating. The fire pans are holy, not because of Moses' human act but rather because God sanctified them. God desired that the pans be employed as a sign to the Israelites - lest they rebel against God's chosen leader. At once, Ramban's two interpretations conflict and dovetail with each other.

Whereas his first understanding demonstrates humans (i.e. Moses) wanting a distinct sign from God, the second interpretation argues that God desires to give humans a clear sign - one that will be remembered and learned from throughout the generations.

Korah and his cohorts teach us a powerful lesson. While we seek signs from God, God also gives us tangible signs in our world - signs that challenge us to learn and grow. And more significantly, we are given a lesson in the ability of transforming stumbling blocks into sacred moments. That which was used to distance the Israelites from God becomes the means to bring the Israelites closer - closer to God by learning from their past and moving ahead toward a hopeful future. May we have the capacity to take this Torah teaching to heart - looking for signs of God and elevating troubling moments in our personal lives to profound learning experiences.

PARASHAT PINHAS: "WHO'S NEXT? THE CHANGE AND CHALLENGE OF LEADERSHIP"

Cantor Janice L. Roger

From urj.org

PARASHAH OVERVIEW

- ☞ Pinhas is rewarded for killing the Israelite and the Midianite woman who disobeyed God. (25:10–15)
- ☞ Israel fights a war against the Midianites. (25:16-18)
- ☞ A second census is taken. (26:1–65)
- ☞ The daughters of Z'loph'chad force a change in the laws of property inheritance. (27:1–11)
- ☞ Joshua is chosen to be Moses' successor. (27:15–23)
- ☞ The sacrificial ritual for all festival occasions is described in detail. (28:1–29:39)

FOCAL POINT

Moses spoke to Adonai, saying, "Let Adonai, Source of the breath of all flesh, appoint someone over the community who shall go out before them and come in before them and who shall take them out and bring them in, so that Adonai's community may not be like sheep that have no shepherd." And Adonai answered Moses, "Single out Joshua son of Nun, an inspired man, and lay your hand upon him. Have him stand before Eleazar the priest and before the whole community and commission him in their sight. Invest him with some of your authority so that the whole Israelite community may obey. But he shall present himself to Eleazar the priest, who shall on his behalf seek the decision of the Urim before Adonai. By such instruction they shall go out and by such instruction they shall come in, he and all the Israelites, the whole community" (Numbers 27:15–21).

52

52

YOUR GUIDE

- ☞ Moses' foremost concern upon learning that he will soon die is for the welfare of the community. What does this indicate about him as a person? As the head of a family? As a leader?
- ☞ What assumptions does Moses make about what will happen to the Israelites after he dies?
- ☞ God says that Joshua is "an inspired man." Are there other qualities aside from "inspired" that you would use to describe a leader of the Israelites? What does the phrase "inspired man" mean to you?
- ☞ Why must Joshua also have the decision of the Urim (objects used to ascertain God's will) after Moses has performed the ritual of succession?
- ☞ How much authority do you think Joshua should have while Moses is still alive?
- ☞ What might the consequences, both positive and negative, be regarding the timing of Moses' death?

BY THE WAY...

When David's life was drawing to a close, he instructed his son Solomon as follows: "I am going the way of all the earth; be strong and show yourself a man. Keep the charge of Adonai your God, walking in God's ways and following God's laws, commandments, rules, and admonitions as recorded in the Teaching of Moses, in order that you may succeed in whatever you undertake and wherever you turn" (I Kings: 2:1–3).

We pray for all who hold positions of leadership and responsibility in our national life. Let Your blessing rest upon them, and make them responsive to Your will, so that our nation may be to the world an example of justice and compassion (*Gates of Prayer for Shabbat and Weekdays*, CCAR Press, p. 186).

It being the will of God that our race should exist and be permanently established, God in His wisdom gave it such properties that a human being can acquire the capacity of ruling others. Some persons are therefore inspired with theories of legislation, such as prophets and lawgivers; others possess the power of enforcing the dictates of the former and of compelling people to obey them and to act accordingly (Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*).

No Person except a natural born Citizen or a Citizen of the United States, at the time of the Adoption of this Constitution, shall be eligible to the Office of President; neither shall any Person be eligible to that Office who shall not have attained to the Age of 35 Years, and been fourteen Years a Resident within the United States (United States Constitution, Article II, Section 1, Clause 5).

When Moses here addressed himself to God, he thought that perhaps his sons would succeed him. But God told him that it was not to be as he imagined: "Joshua will be the one to come in your place, not your sons. For he served you many years, rising in the morning to prepare the house of study--arranging the benches, straightening the mats, and doing the same in the evenings. By right he is, therefore, the one to succeed you." Thus it is written [in Proverbs 27:18], "He who guards a fig tree shall eat its fruit" (*Yalkut Shimoni*).

Because of not daring to be ahead of the world, one becomes the leader of the world (*The Way of Lao-Tzu*).

53

53

The final test of a leader is that he leaves behind him in other men the conviction and the will to carry on.... The genius of a good leader is to leave behind him a situation that common sense, without the grace of genius, can deal with successfully (Walter Lippman in "Roosevelt Has Gone," April 14, 1945).

It says, literally, "Appoint someone over the community" [Numbers 27:16]. Moses asked for a man among men; a man, not a superman; a man, not a burning zealot like Pinhas (*Al HaTorah*, vol. IV, p. 445).

YOUR GUIDE

Based on King David's advice and the Gates of Prayer selection, how do you think faith and religion play a part in governance?

In Numbers 27:20, "Seek the decision of the Urim before Adonai," the Torah makes a direct connection between God and leadership. How does this compare to the way in which Maimonides understands God's involvement in the creation of leaders?

God's description of Joshua as "an inspired man" and the presidential qualifications stated in the Constitution are both vague. What are the advantages of such a lack of definition? What are its drawbacks?

Since the priesthood was an inherited position, Moses had reason to believe that one of his sons would become his successor, as envisioned in the midrash of *Yalkut Shimoni*. What do you think are some justifications for choosing an individual other than Moses' son?

How does Moses' description of the role of his successor, "Appoint someone over the community who shall go out before them and come in before them and who shall take them out and bring them in," differ from the statement attributed to Lao-Tzu?

In your opinion, how does Moses fare according to Walter Lippman's assessment of "the final test of a leader?"

D'VAR TORAH

The Torah teaches, "Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses..." (Deuteronomy 34:10). His hands-on approach to leading the Israelites to the Promised Land as well as to teaching them what God expected of them is unparalleled by later biblical figures. In his brief prayer (Numbers 27:15–21), Moses demonstrates some of the qualities that made him a great leader: his faith, his understanding of the needs of the Israelites, and his concern for their well-being.

But Moses was so entrenched in who the Israelites had been and whence they had come that he may not have recognized the necessity for a new type of leadership. Moses spoke of the people as continuing to need a shepherd; God, however, knew that more was required for the people to enter the Promised land. Thus, although Joshua would be Moses' successor, he would not have the same tasks that Moses had been given. New leadership was necessary to accomplish a new objective. Nonetheless, it needed to be leadership that was also inspired by faith and concern.

Whenever there is a change in leadership, the transition is crucial. This vignette in the Torah presents one model for such a transition. However, every change in leadership--be it in the political, religious, or business arena--produces its own set of circumstances and needs. Our mission is to recognize this reality and to act accordingly. The Torah provides us with models and principles to guide us in that endeavor.

Parashat Devarim: The Power of Words
Rabbi Steven Carr Reuben

When John woke up that Sunday morning and could neither move nor speak, he realized that something terrible had happened. Somehow during the night he had suffered a stroke. He struggled in a panic to get out of bed and succeeded merely in rolling off and landing in an awkward sprawl on the floor. The sound of his dead weight hitting the wood startled his wife from her sleep and straight into the waking nightmare that has persisted to this day.

Later that afternoon I arrived in the ICU at UCLA Hospital to see him. It was the eyes that got me the most. His body was propped up in the bed, and was barely moving. But his eyes were steadily roaming up and down, right and left, seeming to be moving in several directions at once - actually, staring in several directions would be more accurate.

He became so affected that he seemed like a caged animal, giving off an intense restlessness without making a sound. But still, it was the intensity of those eyes that was most chilling. I sat with him that day and then nearly every day for the next two weeks as he slowly regained some limited mobility. I watched as his brain began to wind its way through the complex pathways of its inner space and one step at a time, piece by piece began to put its house back in order. Well, almost back in order; his speech has never fully recovered. Those first few days were filled with such intense sadness, such naked fear, such passionate pain and suffering - for John, for his wife Ann, for his two kids, for the rest of his family and friends - that it is difficult even for me to recall without a welling of tears. For John, the immense frustration of his tragic situation was nearly unbearable. Every time I was with him, he would try unsuccessfully to speak, then fall back in frustration and weep.

In the midst of his suffering, I was reminded by John during the days we spent together in the hospital of one of the most powerful lessons of the human condition: that perhaps the greatest gift that we have ever been given by God is the simple ability to communicate with another human being. Without that ability, without that window opening from our soul to another, we are trapped in a solitary confinement more terrible than "the hole" in the darkest prison in the world. It was John who eventually told me that he experienced more terror at his inability to speak than from his inability to walk and move his hands and legs as he chose. It was John who confided that his greatest fear was that he would never be able to say, "I love you" to his wife, "I'm proud of you" to his children, "I need you" to his family. His silence was deafening, terrifying, debilitating, and when he realized he could not speak, all he could do was cry.

It is primarily through speech that we communicate our hopes and dreams, our longings and joys to those we love. Words are our lifeline to touch the souls of others. And that is why the name of this week's Torah portion, which also gives its name to the entire fifth book of the Torah is so powerful.

Devarim, the name of both the portion and the book, means "words" in Hebrew. Eleh hadevarim asher diber Moshe: "These are the words that Moses spoke to all Israel..." In a remarkable irony, Moses, who is introduced to us at the burning bush with the words "Oh God, I am not a man of words" (Exodus 4:10), is here expounding the entire Torah not only "to all Israel" but (according to the midrash) in the 70 languages of the rest of the world as well.

Think about the power of words this week and the precious gift that they truly are in your life. Your words can heal. Your words can inspire. Like Moses, your words can make a difference in the life of another, perhaps an entire people, perhaps the entire world.

Ekev 5763

Rabbi Lauren Eichler Berkun

The themes of fertility and barrenness are central to the biblical narrative. It is striking how often we encounter barren women in the Bible. Sarah, the women of Abimelekh's household, Rebekah, Rachel, Manoah's wife, Hannah, and the Shunamite woman are all examples of barren women whose wombs are opened by God. Clearly, the process of reproduction holds a key to biblical theology. The very covenant of Israel is presented as a brit of fertility. God promises Abram, "This is my covenant with you. You shall be the father of a multitude of nations...I will make you exceedingly fertile." (Genesis 17:4, 6). This week's parashah further emphasizes the connection between covenant and childbearing. Moses teaches:

And if you do obey these rules and observe them carefully, the Lord your God will maintain faithfully for you the covenant that He made on oath with your fathers: He will favor you and bless you and multiply you; He will bless the issue of your womb...You shall be blessed above all other peoples: there shall be no sterile male or female among you or among your livestock... (Deuteronomy 7:12-14).

As we explore the theme of fertility in the context of Parashat Ekev, we uncover one of the theological underpinnings of the barrenness motif in the Bible.

Our Torah portion contributes to two important elements of Jewish liturgy: the birkat ha-mazon (prayer of thanksgiving after a meal) and the Shema. In both cases, the Torah text responds to the threat of abundance. Following the directive to bless God after eating, the Torah explains the necessity for such a prayer discipline:

When you have eaten your fill, and have built fine houses to live in, and your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold have increased, and everything you own has prospered, beware lest your heart grow haughty and you forget the Lord your God... and you say to yourselves, 'My own power and the might of my own hand have won this wealth for me.' (Deut. 8:11-14,17)

This passage expresses the divine anxiety about bringing the Israelites out of the barren desert into a land of milk and honey. Perhaps the Israelites would forget the ultimate source of their livelihood amidst the lush and fertile soil? While they were depending on God for manna and miraculous bursts of water, the Israelites could not forget God's reigning hand in their sustenance. However, as farmers on their own sovereign land, the Israelites might easily develop a sense of autonomous human control over life.

It was for this very same reason, according to our parashah, that God removed the Israelites from Egypt. The delusion of human self-sufficiency was characteristic of life in Egypt. We learn that geography and topography are central factors in the spiritual experience. Man's relationship with water, in particular, determines his approach to the divine. Moses explains the essential difference between life in Egypt and life in the Holy Land:

For the land that you are about to enter and possess is not like the land of Egypt from which you have come.

There the grain you sowed had to be watered by your own labors, like a vegetable garden; but the land you are about to cross into... soaks up its water from the rains of heaven. It is a land which the Lord your God looks after, on which the Lord your God always keeps His eye.... (Deut. 11:10-12)

In Egypt, the source of water lay at man's feet: the overflow of the Nile provided ample water for irrigation. Through the human effort of collecting this water, Egyptians lived and prospered. However, God wanted to rear a nation that would not look down for an automatic source of water. Rather, Israelites in the Promised Land would look up to the heavens for rain. Furthermore, as the Torah goes on to explain, this source of rain would depend on the moral accountability of the Israelite nation. As the second paragraph of the Shema proclaims, God brought the Israelites into a land which would physically manifest the status of their covenantal relationship with God: "If, then, you obey the commandments that I enjoin upon you this day...I will grant the rain for your land." (Deut. 11:13). The agricultural realities of the Land of Israel foster a spiritual dependency on God.

On the one hand, the Israelites enter a bountiful land. This transition from the desert to a fruitful land might result in a level of arrogance and spiritual forgetfulness. The antidote is prayer, the birkat ha-mazon. On the other hand, the Israelites enter a land dependent on rain as the main source of water. This transition from Egypt's Nile to a land of limited water is insurance for a God-centered existence.

Our Torah portion highlights God's fundamental role in the continuation and survival of life, from the covenantal promise of fertility to the command for blessings after meals to the assurance of rain for a faithful nation. From this perspective, the recurring theme of barrenness in the Bible is not surprising. Human procreation is perhaps the greatest threat to an awareness of God's pivotal role in life. We create human beings out of our own bodies! And yet, the Torah teaches over and over again that it is God who opens the womb. God is the giver of life. Conception is due to the merciful attention of God. Yes, we are partners with God in the ongoing work of Creation. But, we must never forget that God alone is the architect of life. This is why the Talmud claims that God's own hands retain three keys: "the Key of Rain, the Key of Reproduction and the Key of Resurrection" (B. Ta'anit 2a).

May our lives be blessed with abundance, but may we always remember that it is the Living Eternal God who brings us into the life of this world, sustains us in life, and returns us to life in the World to Come.

Parashat Ha'azinu/Shabbat Shuvah: "Is God Straight?"

Rabbi Menachem Creditor

One of the most difficult things to do in this post 9/11 world is justify God.

We read in this week's parasha: "The Rock! His deeds are perfect. Yes all God's ways are just; a faithful God never false, true and straight is God. (Deut. 32:4)" The first hard step is to hold God to the standard of faithfulness we hold each other. If I have an obligation to protect you, and harm comes to you- it's my fault. Even if I didn't cause the pain. My fault.

If we work in the biblical model of "God-the-Protector-when-we-behave" we are left after tragedy saying that it is God's fault for not being faithful to the promise to protect. There are those in our world who say that human evil leads to God's punishment. I reject that. God is not out to correct us- we were given the ability to make choices and face our own consequences. There are those in our world who claim that the reason bad things happen to such-and-such a family is that they didn't check their mezuzahs. That approach makes God into a monster. "You didn't keep things tip-top, and so I'm coming after you. Told you to be careful!" My deep belief is that the biblical image of midah keneged midah, measure for measure, just doesn't work in our world.

So I look at God differently. I wonder where our "true and straight" God was on 9/11, and where might the Straight One be now.

A very close friend of mine escaped from the 73rd floor of the South Tower. He wrote recently: "Why I escaped while others did not is something I still question." Because even if someone did escape from the Twin Towers, and blessedly still has their life, they trade the question, "Why me" for "Why not me?" This condition is called "Survivor's Guilt."

58

Who gets "Survivor's Guilt?" Anyone who walked away while others died. So we all, in a sense, are survivors. But my question this week goes a little more directly to the source. If we believe that God survived 9/11, does Adonai our God feel guilt?

58

It's a crazy idea, I know. But I take very seriously the idea taught by our tradition that, when Jerusalem was destroyed, the Holy One went into exile with us.

This is what I believe: On 9/11, God was rushing with the emergency workers, firemen, police officers, et al. as they ran into the towers to save people. I believe, as Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote, that God was holding up the rafters of the buildings so that more people could escape. I believe that God sat crying with families looking for their loved ones. And I believe that God has survivor's guilt.

I believe that God needs redemption at least as much as we do.

Rambam: Hilchot Teshuva 3:8 –

Every person must see themselves as half worthy and half guilty. And so too all the world, as if it were half worthy and half guilty. A person sins one sin, behold they tip themselves, and tip the whole world, onto the scale of guilt. A person performs one good deed, behold they tip themselves, and tip the whole world, onto the scale of merit.

Our mission in life is to find the broken places of this world and fix them. For ourselves, and for

God. Last year this world found itself more broken than before, and our job is to change that. It will not change, and God will sit alone feeling guilty unless we embrace the difficult parts of this world and feed our love into their realities.

And that is Tikun Olam, fixing this world. It means, like we say in the second paragraph of the Shema, "LeTakein Olam BeMalchut Shadai, to fix this world in God's image."

I would offer a personal translation: Our holy purpose in this world is to imagine God's dreams for this world, see that our dreams aren't so different, and make them true.