

MiKemach l'Torah: A Book of Challah-Based Torah Commentary

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Abstract:

This capstone project is the first iteration of a book manuscript, the outgrowth of a multi-year public project in using challah as an interpretive medium for studying and teaching Torah and the Jewish calendar. This book is designed to be accessible for readers at various levels of Jewish literacy, and to be a resource for personal and communal study, as well as creative engagement with Jewish tradition. By showcasing my own engagement with Torah through an unusual creative “language,” and providing resources for others to do the same in myriad other media, my hope—and that of the CCAR Press, which will publish the finished work—is that this book will open new pathways for Torah study, facilitating new insights and interpretations that expand our collective understanding of *torah*.

There are four main sections to this book, beginning with an introduction, which contains an overview of the evolution of challah from the Torah through to the modern day, a reflection on the significance of challah as a medium for interpreting Jewish tradition, and suggestions for how to use the content that follows. Following the introduction is the Torah commentary; there is a dedicated chapter for every *parasha* in the Torah, each of which contains: an image of my challah for the *parasha* along with the verses on which it is based, a short *d'rasha* that emerges from this interpretive design, and a series of reflective questions and creative prompts. After the Torah commentary, a similarly-structured section covers every major Jewish holiday and Rosh Chodesh. An appendix of challah recipes, shaping techniques, blessings relating to challah, and other useful materials relevant to this medium concludes the manuscript.

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Contents

<u>Why Challah?</u>	<u>1</u>
<u>The History of Challah</u>	<u>7</u>
<u>How to Use this Book</u>	<u>22</u>
<u>Genesis</u>	<u>27</u>
<u>Exodus</u>	<u>77</u>
<u>Leviticus</u>	<u>120</u>
<u>Numbers</u>	<u>150</u>
<u>Deuteronomy</u>	<u>187</u>
<u>The Cycle of the Year</u>	<u>227</u>
<u>Appendices</u>	<u>306</u>
<u>Bibliography</u>	<u>321</u>

Why Challah?

There is a challah in the oven as I write these words, filling my small apartment with an absolutely heavenly aroma. I grasp for appropriate adjectives to describe the scent—yeasty? malty? sweet? earthy?— but the words that come most easily are emotions and associations— Shabbat, anticipation, warmth, home, happiness— along with memories of long Friday evenings spent in crowded rooms, with warm loaves of challah emitting puffs of steam as they are ripped apart and tossed around the table to friends, or to strangers about to become friends. For many Jews, the taste and smell of challah is synonymous with the Shabbat and holiday table, or with family, or tradition— whether it is something they grew up with, or not. Challah is no ordinary bread; it is rich with religious and spiritual resonance, as well as powerful sensory memories that are often connected to community and culture. This wide range of associations that challah evokes is part of what makes it such a powerful medium for exploring and conveying other aspects of Jewish tradition, including sacred texts. The medium itself carries a message.

There are centuries-old traditions of shaping challah in symbolic ways, especially to reflect the themes of different holidays and seasons; using challah dough to interpret and teach Torah is a recent phenomenon, and for me, something that happened by accident. A few years ago, I decided to try my hand at bread-baking, and figured that making challah for Shabbat would be a logical way to start. After making several successful loaves, I happened upon some pictures of vividly rainbow colored challot online, and noted that Parashat Noah— containing God's rainbow-sealed covenant with Noah— was coming up soon, on the same weekend as a shabbaton gathering with my rabbinical and cantorial classmates. That Friday morning, I made a double batch of dough, divided it into sixths and dyed each

portion with a swirl of a different color of the rainbow, braided, baked, and brought them to the gathering. We recited *hamotzi*, the blessing over bread, on the loaves and broke into them, and my classmates delightedly ate handfuls of green, purple, and orange challah. I still had a bite of blue challah in my mouth when one of the Deans came up to me and asked, “Vanessa, do you match your challot to the Torah portion every week?” I certainly did no such thing at the time, but somewhere in the time it took to finish chewing and answer his question, I had jumped to the hardest parasha I could think of (Tazria-Metzora) and come up with an idea for a challah that made sense, so I answered, for reasons that I still cannot explain, “I do now!” Thus, @lechlechallah was born.

Over the course of a year of studying the weekly Torah portion in order to interpret a few of its verses in the form of a challah, I found that reading Torah through this lens is a very different experience than when planning to write a sermon, for instance. Some verses lend themselves better to visual interpretation than others, especially when the medium used is not as precise as pencil or as versatile as paint. I had to learn the shapes that bread dough was capable of holding, and my Torah interpretation had to be expressible within those limits. Constraints can encourage creativity, however; and as I worked my way through the Torah, I found that this lens was opening my eyes to details I might not have noticed, and that the act of shaping the dough was shaping my *torah*.

Challah dough may have some limits as an artistic medium, but it also comes with unique advantages. Not only does it carry the powerful sensory and spiritual resonances of a food with a three-thousand year religious and cultural history, but it is also *alive*, and has the power to nourish life in turn. Yeast is a living unicellular organism that drives the rising and flavor development of dough, interacting with the other ingredients as well as the

surrounding atmosphere. The yeast-powered dough can be unpredictable at times, contributing its own responses and personality to the finished product; it is a *chevruta* (study partner), a co-creator in the process of creating an interpretive challah design.

Working with challah dough as an interpretive medium mirrors the process of text study with a *chevruta* in many ways; the text is at the center, and both partners contribute to the process of navigating the text and producing an interpretation, resulting in a conclusion that neither party could have reached entirely on their own, and tempered by the boundaries of what the material (both text and dough, in this case) reasonably allow. Whenever I put a challah into the oven, I know that it will not come out exactly as I have planned, because the yeast will have a hand in the final product as well—sometimes for the better!—and learning to accept this part of the process is good practice for being open to other people’s interpretations, even when they are at odds with my own.

On a spiritual level, making and shaping challah dough also offers a microcosmic connection to Creation, as well as a creative experience of *imitatio dei* (imitation of God). *B’reisheet bara*, we begin to create (Genesis 1:1), by pouring the water, a primordial element present at the start of Creation, when “the earth was welter and waste, with darkness over the surface of the deep, and the spirit of God hovering over the water” (1:2). We add the yeast—which will give the dough the *nishmat chayyim*, life-giving breath (2:7)—and it spreads out over the water like God’s hovering *ruach*, spirit.

The dry ingredients are measured into one bowl, and the liquid into another, as the seas were gathered together so that the dry land could appear (1:9). Into the flour, the product of the grasses which sprouted on the fourth day of Creation (1:11), we sprinkle salt from the ancient seas (1:10). In another bowl, the yeasty water mingles with oil, perhaps from the

fruit-bearing olive trees (1:11), as well as eggs from the birds who were blessed to be fertile and increase (1:22) and honey from the bees that arrived just before the first human beings on day six (1:25).

The wet and dry ingredients are combined, and the water activates the flour's proteins; and as the dough is slowly kneaded and worked (2:2), forming gluten molecules—the long strands that give the dough its structure and order, just as the sun and moon were charged with bringing order and structure to the day and night skies (1:18). These strands of gluten will contain the the yeast's chaotic, *tohu vavohu* processes (1:2) of consuming the flour's starches (1:30) and expelling pockets of air, like the expanse between the waters that formed the sky on Creation's second day (1:7). These air pockets, captured by the glutenous net, enable the dough to *p'ru ur'vu*, to be fruitful and multiply (1:28), rising to double or triple its size.

Once kneaded and formed, like the first human being from the dust of the earth (2:7), the dough rests, as God did on the seventh day, which we honor each Shabbat (2:2). After its rest and rise, the dough is ready for the offering of *hafrashat challah* (Lev. 15:21), and then, like Eve (4:1), to become a partner with the creator in forming a new creation.

Once that new creation has been interpretively shaped and baked, it takes on a new dual role as a source of nourishment, and a source of Torah— a literal manifestation of Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria's dictum, “אִם אֵין קָמַחַ, אֵין תּוֹרָה. אִם אֵין תּוֹרָה, אֵין קָמַחַ; if there is no bread [lit. flour], there is no Torah, and if there is no Torah, there is no bread” (Pirkei Avot 3:17). With its many layers of spiritual and religious resonance and its many associations with tradition and culture and other memories, the challah, the centerpiece of the festive table, provides spiritual sustenance along with satisfying physical nourishment felt from the first bite after

the blessing of *HaMotzi*. As a bread, challah is considered paradigmatic of sustenance in general (hence why *HaMotzi* covers all of the categories of food eaten at a meal which features bread), and serving an interpretively-shaped challah connects physical sustenance to the spiritual sustenance of words of Torah, elevating both. The interpretive challah brings Torah to the table in an embodied, intriguing, and innovative way; whereas it was traditional for Torah to be brought to the Shabbat table in the form of an oral *d'var torah* (traditionally, again, delivered by a man), the interpretive challah takes the traditionally female province of making the bread and turn it into an egalitarian medium for teaching Torah and being nourished in body and soul simultaneously. Just as the Pesach seder plate is an edible centerpiece designed to provoke questions and learning, so too is the interpretive challah, but instead of being a fixed set of symbols, the challah offers a dynamic canvas for creative *torah* that is unique each week.

Initially, this process of creating weekly challah commentary was a personal one, to facilitate my own spiritual growth. I began sharing photos of my challot on Instagram, mostly as a way to keep myself accountable and to have the images collected neatly in one place. Unexpectedly, the account acquired followers, and I began adding short commentaries in the captions so that folks could understand the ideas behind the images. The @lechlechallah project spoke to people so much more than I could have imagined, and so it expanded: I continued for another year, using the Jewish calendar as my text, and I developed a challah-based text study methodology and repertoire of shaping techniques to teach to others, and began teaching folks of all ages how to create edible *torah* with their own hands. And now here, in your hands, is a refined and expanded version of four years of learning and

teaching about challah and creative *torah*. Whether you came for the challah and stay for the *torah*, or the other way around, I hope that this book brings you nourishment and inspiration.

The History of Challah: An Overview

The story of how the braided, eggy challah made its way to Shabbat tables, supermarket shelves, and the pages of this book weaves in strands of biblical and rabbinic law, culinary history, technological innovation, and customs from all around the world. Like many good stories, this one begins in the Torah, though it has several starting points that eventually come together in the form and function of the challah we know today.

The Law of Challah

Challah's early significance, which has carried over into many of its religious functions today, was specifically connected to the Israelite Temple cult. This biblical system of worship was based on sacrifices rather than prayers, and required priests to perform religious functions on Israel's behalf. In contrast to members of other the twelve tribes, the priests did not have land allocated to them, and thus relied upon tithes and certain portions of sacrifices brought by other Israelites if they were to eat. One such tithe was called *challah*:

וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: דַּבֵּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם בְּבֹאֲכֶם אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מְבִיא אֲתֶכֶם שָׁמָּה: וְהָיָה בְּאֲכֹלְכֶם מִלֶּחֶם הָאָרֶץ תְּרִימוּ תְּרוּמָה לַיהוָה: רִאשִׁית עֲרֹסְתֵיכֶם חֲלֶה תְּרִימוּ תְּרוּמָה כְּתֻרֹמֶת גֶּרֶן כֹּן תְּרִימוּ אֹתָהּ: מִרִאשִׁית עֲרֹסְתֵיכֶם תִּתְּנוּ לַיהוָה תְּרוּמָה לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם:

The Eternal spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: When you enter the land to which I am taking you and you eat of the bread of the land, you shall offer an offering to the Eternal: **as the first yield of your dough, you shall offer a *challah* as an offering**; you shall offer it as an offering like the offering from the threshing floor. You shall make an offering to the Eternal from the first yield of your dough, throughout the ages. (Numbers 15: 17-21)

Though the precise meaning of *challah* in this context is not clear, Jewish food historian Gil Marks argues that it most likely refers to a thick loaf of bread,¹ though “thick,” as far as biblical bread goes, would be thin by today’s standards. Bread baking techniques in the

¹ Marks, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food*, 96.

ancient near east relied on very high and direct heat—dough would generally be cooked over hot coals, griddles, or slapped on the walls of beehive ovens, and it would not cook through unless it was rolled very thinly.² A thicker loaf required more sophisticated baking technology, such as a baking container fitted with spikes that would distribute the heat to the center of the loaves during cooking, so that the insides cooked before the outsides completely burned.³ The word *challah* may be derived from the root *chalal*, one meaning of which is “pierced,”⁴ indicating this type of baking technique.⁵ The *challah*, therefore, was likely a thick loaf of bread, made from a portion of the household batch of dough and gifted to the local *kohanim* (priests) as a spiritual offering to God and a physical offering to sustain the priests and their families.⁶

After the Second Temple was destroyed in 70 CE, most laws related to sacrifice and *kohanim* went on permanent hiatus, with the notable exception of the law of *challah*. Torah law limits the scope of the *challah* offering to the land of Israel [“when you enter the land to which I am taking you and you eat the bread of the land” (Num. 15:18)], and on a practical level, this law only makes sense within a system in which priests are engaged in the work of offering sacrifices. And yet, an entire *masechet* (tractate) of the Mishnah—Mishnah Challah—is dedicated to explicating and expanding this theoretically defunct law, and the Talmud Bavli later confirmed that the *halakhah* (Jewish law) related to

² Marks, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food*, 96. For more on bread production in the Ancient Near East, see: Francesca Balossi Restelli and Lucia Mori, “Bread, Baking Moulds and Related Cooking Techniques in the Ancient Near East.”

³ Marks, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food*, 96.

⁴ Clines, David J. A., et al, *The Concise Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, 119.

⁵ Marks, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food*, 96.

⁶ Rabbi Lynn Gottlieb argues for a very different potential origin of the word *challah*, “The word *challah* appears to be related to the word for women’s dancing called *machol* and refers to round dancing and holding bread while dancing and praying. Women baked cakes to the Goddess on the new moon as a way of celebrating the renewal of the substance of life and to give expression to her Presence through the bread” (quoted in: Sautter, *The Miriam Tradition*, 103).

challah was still in force, even in the Diaspora, “so that the *torah* [instruction] of *challah* will not be forgotten” (BT Berachot 27a).⁷ Because women were the primary bread bakers at this point in time (and for most of history),⁸ and since laws relating to food (*kashrut*) and other aspects of household operations were under women’s purview as well as women’s primary site for spiritual fulfillment,⁹ some scholars believe that this law persisted because women continued to uphold it post-Exile as an act of piety.¹⁰ The male rabbis, responding to what was actually going on in Jewish households, codified the practice according to their own legal system,¹¹ and may have added strict threats of punishment to compensate for the fact that this was a domain in which they would have to rely on women to fulfill the laws correctly, as the women would be acting on the men’s behalf.¹²

However it happened, eventually, Numbers 15:17-21 evolved into the practice of *hafrashat challah*,¹³ or separation of *challah*, in which a symbolic olive-sized portion of a

⁷ There are some notable changes to the laws, of course, mostly due to the fact that most priests cannot maintain ritually pure states, and thus cannot consume the *challah* offering correctly; this is where the practice of burning or discarding the *challah* offering, so that no one can benefit from it, arises. See SA YD 322, or *Sefer HaChinuch* 385 for a summary of these changes.

⁸ See: Meyers, “Having Their Space and Eating There Too: Bread Production and Female Power in Ancient Israelite Households.”

⁹ Hauptman, “The Talmud’s Women in Law and Narrative,” 31-32.

¹⁰ Yitz Landes, unpublished lecture, “Food, Gender, and Ritual: A History of Challah,” August 2018. Landes’ theory is substantiated by the enduring phenomenon of home-based ritual practices (women’s sphere) tending to maintain continuity with tradition even when a cultural or geographic shift occurs [see Weihouse, “Jewish Ashkenazi Gastronomy in Northern Italy in the Early Modern Period,” 231, as an example]. Haym Soloveitchik’s note on the traditional kitchen in later centuries also supports this supposition, “The traditional kitchen provides the best example of the neutralizing effect of tradition, especially since the mimetic tradition continued there long after it was lost in most other areas of Jewish life” (“Rupture and Reconstruction: The Transformation of Contemporary Orthodoxy,” 109).

¹¹ As Haym Soloveitchik has written on the relationship between intellectual and mimetic tradition in later Ashkenazic tradition, “Custom was a correlative datum of the halachic system. And, on frequent occasions, written word was reread in light of traditional behavior” (“Rupture and Reconstruction: The Transformation of Contemporary Orthodoxy,” 67)

¹² “Since rabbis devised the food rules but were not going to carry them out themselves, it was in their interest to trust the [women] to do exactly as they were taught. Even so, they threatened women with dire consequences for carelessness in performing the rituals: divorce without a *ketubah* payment (Mishnah *Ketubot* 7:6) or death in childbirth (Mishnah *Shabat* 2:6). Men entrusted rituals to women but used every technique at their disposal to make sure the women followed through” (Hauptman, “The Talmud’s Women in Law and Narrative,” 41).

¹³ In Yiddish, this is called *nemn khale*. (Marks, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food*, 96)

batch of dough is removed after the dough has risen and before it is shaped, blessed, and then burned or discarded (for a guide to performing *hafrashat challah*, see p. 317).¹⁴ This *mitzvah* (commandment) is traditionally incumbent upon women, along with the *mitzvot* of *hadleikat neivot*, candle lighting, and *niddah*, family purity. Accordingly, over the centuries, women developed special rituals and prayers— such as *tkhines* (women’s prayers in Yiddish) and meditations— centered around the performance of *hafrashat challah*.¹⁵ The moment of separating the *challah* is said to be an auspicious time for prayers to be answered, and prayers for healing, for matchmaking, and for successful pregnancies are commonly associated with the *hafrashat challah* ritual. Organized gatherings to make challah for the merit of someone in particular need of such prayers, or simply to make sufficient quantities of dough at a time in order for the participants to be able to perform *hafrashat challah*, are still common today.¹⁶

Lechem HaPanim

This *mitzvah* of separating out the *challah* offering, which has been observed continuously since biblical times and “throughout the ages” (Num. 15:21), is certainly an important aspect of challah’s religious and spiritual significance, but it is not the only one, nor is it the only one which can be traced back to the Torah. Biblical religious practices also

¹⁴ The *mitzvah* of *hafrashat challah* is only required for dough made with at least 3 pounds and 11 ounces of either wheat, barley, spelt, oat, or rye flour and in which a majority of the liquid content is water; for dough made with more than 2 pounds 11 ounces, but not reaching the minimum requirement for the blessing, dough is separated but not blessed.

¹⁵ Chava Weissler offers an analysis of some of these *tkhines*, which she contrasts with prayers intended for women written by men in “*Mitzvot Built into the Body: Tkhines for Niddah, Pregnancy, and Childbirth*,” (102, 105-107). For a contemporary example, see Rebbetzin Rochie Pinson’s *Rising: The Book of Challah*, which summarizes some of these customs and also contains new meditations for different ingredients, as well as the stages of mixing, kneading, separating, and eating the challah (330; 334-339). See also Shahar, “‘At ‘Amen Meals’ It’s Me and God” Religion and Gender: A New Jewish Women’s Ritual,” and El-Or, “A Temple in Your Kitchen: *Hafrashat Hallah*—The Rebirth of a Forgotten Ritual as a Public Ceremony” for analyses of the recent phenomenon of “amen” meals and public *hafrashat challah* events for women.

¹⁶ Pinson, *Rising*, 330-331.

involved another type of bread; the *lechem panim*, translated as “bread of display” or “showbread,” is introduced in Exodus 25:30 and later described in Leviticus 24:5-9 using the term *challah*— which, as we saw earlier, specifies a thick loaf baked with the “pierced” technique— to refer to each bread:

וְנָתַתָּ עַל־הַשֻּׁלְחָן לֶחֶם פָּנִים לִפְנֵי תָמִיד:

And on the table you shall set the *lechem panim* [bread of display], to be before Me always. (Exodus 25:30)

וּלְקַחְתָּ סֹלֶת וְאַפִּיתָ אֹתָהּ שְׁתֵּים עָשָׂרָה חֲלָוֹת שְׁנֵי עָשָׂרִים יִהְיֶה הַחֲלָהּ הָאֶחָת: וְשָׂמַתָּ אוֹתָם שְׁתֵּים מֵעֲרֻכּוֹת שֶׁשׁ הַמֵּעֲרֻכָּת עַל הַשֻּׁלְחָן הַטָּהוֹר לִפְנֵי יְהוָה: וְנָתַתָּ עַל־הַמֵּעֲרֻכָּת לְבִנְיָה זָכָה וְהִיתָה לְלֶחֶם לְאַזְכָּרָה אִשָּׁה לַיהוָה: בַּיּוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת בַּיּוֹם הַשִּׁבְעִי תַעֲרֻכְנוּ לִפְנֵי יְהוָה תָּמִיד מֵאֵת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּרִית עוֹלָם: וְהִיתָה לְאַהֲרֹן וּלְבָנָיו וְאָכְלֶהוּ בְּמִקְוֹם קֹדֶשׁ כִּי קֹדֶשׁ קֹדָשִׁים הוּא לוֹ מֵאֲשֵׁי יְהוָה חֶק־עוֹלָם:

You shall take choice flour and bake from it twelve *challot* [loaves], two-tenths of a measure for each *challah*. Place them on the pure table before the Eternal in two rows, six to a row. With each row you shall place pure frankincense, which is to be a token offering for the bread, as an offering by fire to the Eternal. [The High Priest] shall arrange them before the Eternal regularly every sabbath day—it is a commitment for all time on the part of the Israelites. They shall belong to Aaron and his sons, who shall eat them in the sacred precinct; for they are his as most holy things from the Eternal’s offerings by fire, a due for all time. (Leviticus 24:5-9)

These twelve breads— representing the twelve tribes of Israel— were baked fresh for each Shabbat by the priestly Garmu family¹⁷ using the best flour available, which was probably finely ground wheat flour,¹⁸ and then displayed on the altar in the Mishkan or Temple all week. The priests would eat the old breads— which stayed fresh all week¹⁹— when new ones were brought to the altar.

¹⁷ BT Yoma 38a explains that the House of Garmu kept the techniques for baking the *lechem panim* a secret, so that an unworthy person would not learn the skill and use it to engage in idol worship; they thought it better that the skill be lost than that it fall into the wrong hands.

¹⁸ John Cooper disagrees with this commonly held assumption, arguing that solet referred to semolina, “the hard grains of flour left over after the milling of wheat” (*Eat and Be Satisfied*, 8).

¹⁹ In BT Menachot 97a, the rabbis discuss a display apparatus with rods that would support and separate the six layers of *lechem panim* on the altar, the purpose of which is to keep the breads from becoming moldy over the course of the week.

Multiple pages of the Talmud Bavli are dedicated to discussing the preparation of the *lechem panim*.²⁰ Based upon the above verses from Leviticus, the rabbis believed that the breads would have been kneaded one by one, set to rise in a special mold, transferred to another mold to be baked in pairs, then transferred to a third mold for retaining their shape (BT Menachot 94a).²¹ The nature of this shape is a matter of extended debate, but the main candidates are either three panels shaped like a squared “U” (“an open box) or two panels shaped like a “V” (“a rocking boat”) (94b);²² each bread would be ten handbreadths long and five handbreadths wide, with “hornlike protrusions” seven fingerbreadths high (96a).

After the destruction of the Temple and the transition from sacrificial worship to prayer, the *lechem panim* could no longer serve its original function, and the techniques for its creation were lost. However, the *lechem panim* continued to live on symbolically as part of the Shabbat table. In BT Chagigah 27a, Rabbi Yochanan and Reish Lakish both say, “In the times that the *Beit HaMikdash* stands, the altar atones for a person; now, a person’s table atones for them.” Everyone’s home table, therefore, became a Temple altar in miniature, and bread became the primary symbolic substitute site for Temple rituals. Hence, practices such as sprinkling salt over the challah after reciting *HaMotzi*, the blessing for bread (Rema, Shulchan Aruch Oreich Chayyim 167:5), because salt would be offered along with every sacrifice in the Temple (Leviticus 2:13). Some also have a practice of not cutting the challah

²⁰ See BT Menachot 94a, beginning at the Mishnah, through 97a.

²¹ Perforated round baking trays, likely molds, from the Middle Bronze Age have been excavated in Israel (Cooper, *Eat and Be Satisfied*, 9). Use of molds for decorative bread shaping existed in surrounding ANE cultures as well; see Restelli and Mori, “Bread, Baking Moulds and Related Cooking Techniques in the Ancient Near East,” pp. 43 and 51. Molds were also likely used for a more complex, and subversive (according to the established tradition) bread shaping ritual in biblical times; in Jeremiah 7:16-20, and 44:17-19, Israelite women are reprimanded for baking cakes in the likeness of the Queen of Heaven as offerings. See Mandel, “Spirituality, Baking, and the Queen of Heaven” for an interesting analysis of this ritual and the gendered implications of ritual baking.

²² By the Middle Ages, the debate seems to have been more settled: Rashi’s commentary to Exodus 25:29 only describes the “open box” option, which he seems to prefer because then the bread has “faces,” or surfaces, which face both directions of the sanctuary.

with a knife, since metal tools were not wielded over the altar.²³ We may also look to the *lechem panim*, made with *solet*, choice flour, as the inspiration for the use of white flour in particular for *challot*. For most of history, fine white flour was an expensive luxury—especially in the Talmudic age and for the Ashkenazim in Europe—usually reserved for the upper classes and special occasions.²⁴ In order to distinguish the Shabbat bread from that of the rest of the week, people would go to great lengths to have even a small loaf made from white flour, befitting the royal *Shabbat HaMalkah*.²⁵

Even though most people do not shape their challot in the “open box” shape of the *lechem panim*,²⁶ some of the most common challah shaping techniques in different Jewish communities around the world refer back to the symbolism of the breads of display. Many Ashkenazi Jews shape two challot braided with six strands each, alluding to the two stacks of six breads; some add a strip of dough down the center, which looks like the Hebrew letter “vav,” (ו), whose numerical equivalent is six.²⁷ A Kabbalist-inspired challah shape especially common in Chasidic communities, called the “*yud-bet*” (יב, the numerical equivalent of 12), consists of a twelve-stranded braid or twelve small rolls, which merge together during proofing, surrounded by a thin strip of dough representing a wish for the reunification of the Jewish people; the individual rolls can then be pulled apart from the whole bread.²⁸

²³ *Shulchan Shel Arba* 1:30.

²⁴ Cooper, *Eat and Be Satisfied*, 40, and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Food and Drink.” Yeast for making these fancy leavened white breads was also an expensive necessity (most weekday breads were made with natural fermentation, i.e., sourdough); in some Ashkenazi communities, a rabbi’s income partially came from a concession on yeast sales (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Food and Drink”).

²⁵ Marks, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food*, 97. Cooper specifies that in the Talmudic age, poorer classes could afford white flour breads for weddings and festivals only; he argues that a Sabbath-specific bread was not yet common at this point in time, except for the wealthy class (*Eat and Be Satisfied*, 40-41). In medieval Fustat, in Egypt, bread rations for the poor Jewish population were better on Shabbat, when fresh, soft bread would be provided, in contrast to a hard biscuit with more staying power for the rest of the week (Cooper, *Eat and Be Satisfied*, 91).

²⁶ I tried this once, in my first challah design for Parashat Beshalach. It’s challenging!

²⁷ Marks, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food*, 98-99.

²⁸ Reider, *The Hallah Book*, 19.

Historically, and still today, many Sepharadi and Mizrahi Jewish communities eat pita-like flatbreads during the week and on Shabbat, but creating specific arrangements of the breads for the Shabbat table, usually in pairs; these breads and arrangements are probably most akin to the original *lechem panim* of any contemporary Jewish breads.²⁹

Manna

Some of these shapes, particularly those arranged in pairs, are also influenced by the early medieval Babylonian custom of reciting *HaMotzi* over two loaves of bread on Shabbat and festivals,³⁰ symbolizing yet another biblical strand of the modern challah's story, the manna that God provided for the Israelites in the wilderness:

וַתַּעַל שְׁכֶבֶת הַטֵּל וְהָיָה עַל־פְּנֵי הַמִּדְבָּר דָּק מְחֻסָּפָס דָּק כְּפָפֹר עַל־הָאָרֶץ: ... וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֱלֹהִים הוּא הֵלֶחֶם אֲשֶׁר נָתַן יְהוָה לָכֶם לֶאֱכֹלָה: זֶה הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה לְקַטֹּף מִמֶּנּוּ אִישׁ לְפִי אֲכָלוּ עֹמֶר לְגִלְגֹּל לֶחֶם מִשְׁנֶה שְׁנֵי הָעֹמֶר לְאֶחָד: ... וַיִּקְרָאוּ בֵּית־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־שְׁמוֹ מֶן וְהָיָה כְּזֶרַע גֹּד לָבֶן וְטַעְמוֹ כְּצַפִּיחֹת בַּדְּבָשׁ:

When the fall of dew lifted, there, over the surface of the wilderness, lay a fine and flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground....And Moses said to them, “That is the bread which the Eternal has given you to eat....Gather as much of it as each of you requires to eat, an omer to a person for as many of you as there are; each of you shall fetch for those in their tent.”... On the sixth day they gathered *lechem mishneh*, **double the amount of food (lit. bread)**, two omers for each.... The house of Israel named it manna; it was like coriander seed, white, and it tasted like wafers in honey. (Exodus 16:14-16, 22, 31)

The double portion of manna provided on the sixth day of the week— so that there would be enough to last for Shabbat without necessitating further work on the sanctified seventh day— eventually evolved into the *mitzvah* of *lechem mishneh*, beginning a Shabbat or holiday meal

²⁹ Glazer, *A Blessing of Bread*, 238. Reider records a Kabbalistic arrangement of twelve pitas in two sets of three pairs, part an elaborate bread ritual practiced by some Sephardi Jews, which is rumored to have originated with Shimon bar Yochai (second century, Tzfat), among other Sephardic communities' arrangements and rituals (*The Hallah Book*, 7-12, 18-19). Pinson asserts that “Iraqi challah [is] probably most similar to the original showbreads of Temple times... round, almost flat, shaped over a pot cover and baked in a clay oven” (*Rising*, 326).

³⁰ Marks, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food*, 97.

with a blessing over two loaves of challah or another bread.³¹ These two loaves represent the double portion of manna for Shabbat, as the connection between the Exodus 16:22 and the name of the *mitzvah* suggests (BT Berachot 39b), though they also commemorate the miracle of the manna in general.³²

In addition to *lechem mishneh*, challah accrued other manna-related symbolic practices over time. Many Sephardi and Mizrahi communities sprinkle sesame seeds over the tops of their Shabbat and holiday breads to commemorate the manna, which was compared to white coriander seeds in the Torah (Exodus 16:31, Numbers 7:11), and which would fall upon the ground like dew or frost in the mornings (Exodus 16:14).³³ Ashkenazi Jews adopted a similar practice of adding seeds to the tops of their challot somewhere around the end of the fifteenth century, at which point they also began to add eggs or saffron as an allusion to the yellow color and richness of cooked manna.³⁴ By the early nineteenth century, they began adding sugar as well, a reference to manna's honey-like taste.³⁵ The nearly universal practice of serving the Shabbat bread on a board, plate, or cloth and covering it

³¹ BT Berachot 39b; see also SA OC 274:1.

³² Commemorating the miracle of the manna also has a *Mishkan/ Beit HaMikdash* parallel; an *omer* of manna was kept in a jar in the Ark at God's command as a perpetual reminder of the miracle (see Exodus 16: 32-34). Abarbanel connects the manna to the *lechem hapanim* as well; the two sets of six showbreads represent the six days of the week during which manna fell twice per day, and the twelve in total might represent the twelve months of the year, and the twelve tribes for which God provides. He concludes that all of these associations served to reinforce the message that God is the ultimate provider (c.f. Exodus 25:23).

³³ Marks, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food*, 97.

³⁴ Marks, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food*, 98. Additionally, one of the oldest European challah shaping techniques— adding a thin strand of dough rolled to look like a string of pearls to the top of an unbraided oval loaf— may have been a reference to the manna, which looked like round coriander seeds or, possibly, pearls (Glezer, *A Blessing of Bread*, 78).

³⁵ Interestingly, the addition of sugar is connected to the rise of sugar-beet refineries spreading across Eastern Europe at this time; as sugar became more affordable, Ashkenazim developed more of a sweet tooth, and sugar made its way into many dishes, including challah (Marks, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food*, 98). The Bene Israel community of Mumbai, India also enriches and sweetens their Shabbat breads, which are *chapatis* made with the addition of coconut milk and sugar (97). Notably, most Sephardic Jews will not use sweetened or egg-enriched breads as their *lechem mishneh*, as these additions make the bread more like cake, which means they would not be fit for the *HaMotzi* blessing, but rather, *Mizonot* (98).

with a(nother) cloth is also said to be symbolic of the manna, which was protected by two layers of dew (see Rashi on Ex. 16:14, and *Shulchan Shel Arba* 1:31).³⁶ The challah cover does have other functions as well,³⁷ including allowing one to recite *Kiddush* over the wine before *HaMotzi* over the bread, which would normally be improper as it subverts the hierarchy of food blessings.³⁸

What's in a Name?

The biblical references to *challah*, as we have seen, refer to a general style of loaf with a particular religious function, but there is no clear evidence for the word *challah* being used to refer to a special bread for Shabbat until 1488, when it appears in Rabbi Joseph ben Moses' work, *Leket Yosher*, in a description of the Shabbat breads served by his teacher, Rabbi Israel Isserlein, "I recall that every *erev Shabbat* they would make him three thin challot, kneaded with eggs and oil and a little bit of water."³⁹ Later, R. ben Moses also describes these breads as *kuchen*, which at the time described a thin bread baked in oil in a pan over a fire⁴⁰— a similar cooking method to certain bread offerings in the Torah (Leviticus 6:14; see also BT Menachot 50b).

Rabbi Isserlein seemed particularly committed to having a special bread made for the purpose of Shabbat, which was distinct from the breads he ate during the week and which made explicit reference to biblical precedents. At around the same time, his fellow Ashkenazim were developing a new strand of challah history; whereas Rabbi Isserlein looked

³⁶ Pinson, *Rising*, 329.

³⁷ The cover may also allude to how the priests packed up the Mishkan when the Israelites broke camp; in Numbers 4, we see the priests placing the *lechem panim* and other altar objects on a blue cloth, then covering this with a red cloth, and then a dolphin skin (vv. 7-8).

³⁸ See SA OC 271:9. Tur Orach Chayim 271 and Rabbeinu Bachya ben Asher's *Shulchan Shel Arba* 1:31 both contain early fourteenth century references to the popular notion that we cover the challah so that it will not be embarrassed that kiddush is recited over the wine and not the bread.

³⁹ Cooper, *Eat and Be Satisfied*, 175; also Astaire, "The Evolution of Challah."

⁴⁰ *Kuchen* later came to refer to cake or something sweet (Astaire, "The Evolution of Challah").

to the Torah for inspiration, other German Jews looked to their non-Jewish neighbors, where they found festive braided Sunday loaves based in an ancient pagan custom that changed the shape of challah forever:

In honor of the winter solstice, ancient German tribes prepared special breads, some shaped in the form of animals. After adopting Christianity, many Germans continued the custom, creating new shapes. *Berchta* or *Perchta* was another name of the malevolent demon/witch *Holle*, an ugly Teutonic crone with long, matted hair. Germans twisted dough to resemble hair and offered the loaves to *Holle* to escape her punishment. Although European Jews certainly did not worship or even to a large extent know anything about *Berchta* or *Holle*, they assimilated the attractive bread.... So a braided lean loaf, suggestive of a special occasion, soon became the most popular form of Ashkenazic Sabbath bread. (Marks 97-98)⁴¹

Holle, as it turns out, sounds remarkably similar to *challah* (or *khale*, as it was pronounced in Western Yiddish)⁴², which may have contributed to the eventual widespread merger of the biblical word *challah* with the festive braided bread for Shabbat by the seventeenth century.⁴³ *Holle*'s alias, *Berchta*, which also sounds like the German word *bercht* (braid), resembles *birkat* (blessing) in Hebrew, leading to another Yiddish name for the braided Shabbat bread common in Southern Germany, Austria, and Hungary: *barches* or *berches*, which sounds like *brochos* (blessings).⁴⁴ Because so many American Jews emigrated from these regions, the Shabbat bread was still referred to as *khale* or *barches* until as late as the early twentieth

⁴¹ Cooper classifies this origin story as speculative (*Eat and Be Satisfied*, 174).

⁴² Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Food and Drink."

⁴³ Marks, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food*, 98.

⁴⁴ Marks, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food*, 98. These are only some of the names for braided Shabbat breads; some Western Germans called *datsher* or *dacher* (a play on *ta'ashir*, "to make rich"), Lithuanian and Latvian Jews called it *kitke* ("weave"), Alsatian and Hungarian Jews sprinkled their breads with poppy seeds and called them *barhesz* or *szombati kalacs* (99). Polish Jews called their breads *koilitch* or *keylitch*. *Shtritsl* appeared in some areas as well (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Food and Drink"). The term *challah* is rarely used for Sephardic Shabbat breads; the generic *pan* or *pita*, are more common. Most Mizrahi communities do not have a special name for Shabbat breads (Glazer, *A Blessing of Bread*, 162; 193). Cooper quotes Samuel Krass, who argues that *berches* is meant to be shaped like interlocked arms, and derives its name from the medieval Latin *bracellus*, meaning arms; though Cooper seems to favor the *berches*/*brochos* explanation as the most plausible source for the bread's name (*Eat and Be Satisfied*, 174).

century, when the anglicized *cholla*, *hallah*, and *challah*, based more closely on the biblical pronunciation, became more common for English speakers.⁴⁵ *Challah* also became the most widely-used name for the Shabbat bread (usually braided) in Israel as well.⁴⁶

Shaping

The braids of these Ashkenazi Shabbat breads had several functions; in addition to being fancy and elegant, therefore elevating the bread to special-occasion status, the braiding keeps the bread fresh for slightly longer,⁴⁷ which is especially useful for a bread made with so many expensive ingredients: white flour, eggs, oil, and later, sugar. Different braiding patterns developed both so that home bakers would be able to distinguish their family's loaves from others brought to the local bakery or communal oven, and different shapes or numbers of strands were used in order to incorporate an element of symbolism inspired by the occasion for which the bread was made. The first such distinction seems to have emerged around breads for Shavuot; in the late medieval period, some Ashkenazi Jews began making their breads with white flour and milk for Shavuot (dairy is traditionally served on Shavuot for a multitude of spiritual and sociological reasons).⁴⁸ In order to avoid accidentally serving dairy breads at a meat meal, which would violate the laws of *kashrut*, these special dairy breads would be shaped into rounds, rather than the ovals and braids customary for Shabbat.⁴⁹ Later on, the round shapes became customary for Rosh Hashanah and the Tishrei holiday season for symbolic reasons (see pp. 228).

⁴⁵ Marks, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food*, 100.

⁴⁶ Marks, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food*, 100.

⁴⁷ Marks, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food*, 98.

⁴⁸ Marks, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food*, 99.

⁴⁹ Marks, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food*, 99.

In the eighteenth century,⁵⁰ Ukrainian Jews in particular began creating increasingly elaborate challah shapes for different holidays: birds and ladders for the pre-Yom Kippur fast, representing the ascension of the coming day's prayers up to heaven;⁵¹ hands for Hoshanah Rabbah (the last day of Sukkot), representing that one's fate for the year is "signed" on that day; the *schlissel* (key) challah for the Shabbat after Pesach, symbolising entry to the gates of heaven for the merit of having observed the *mitzvah* of eating *matzah* (unleavened bread) for the entirety of Pesach, as well as the 'key' to a good livelihood in the coming year.⁵² Lithuanian Jews also used hands as a challah shape for pre-Yom Kippur, as it was customary there to shake hands when asking forgiveness from others.⁵³ Sephardic Jews have an even older tradition of making *el pan de siete cielos*, or "the bread of the seven heavens" for Shavuot, which is full of symbolic shapes representing the giving of Torah on Mount Sinai, as well as other moments from Torah.⁵⁴ These elaborate breads are usually made up of seven rings of dough—representing the seven heavens, the clouds around Sinai, the weeks of the Omer, or the days of Creation, depending on whom you ask—surrounding a central mound representing Sinai. Other shapes, including Torah tablets, Miriam's well, a serpent, a ladder, a hand, and Moses' staff, could be added atop the seven rings. Moroccan Jews have a particularly interesting interactive bread shaping tradition for Purim, in which whole eggs, representing Haman's evil eye, are embedded in the bread and covered with a

⁵⁰ This is the period in which challot began to take on elaborate shapes, but evidence points to an even earlier tradition of adding elaborate shaping and designs to *matzah*, dating from at least the fourteenth century. *Matzah* at this time was about an inch thick, and were sometimes decorated with doves, fish, and animals; Maimonides allowed this practice as long as molds were not used to create the designs (Cooper, *Eat and Be Satisfied*, 114).

⁵¹ "In Motol, near Pinsk, the ladder symbolized "the ups and downs in the life of a person whose fate is judged," and the bird conveyed the idea of a messenger flying to the heavens to receive the verdict for the coming year." (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Food and Drink").

⁵² Marks, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food*, 99, Reider, *The Challah Book*, 21. Some *schlissel* challot are not shaped like keys, but have actual keys pressed into the dough before baking (Glezer, *A Blessing of Bread*, 78).

⁵³ Marks, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food*, 99; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Food and Drink."

⁵⁴ Ronit Treatman, "From Spain to Salonika, a Disappearing Shavuot Tradition Revisited."

thin ‘cage’ of dough before baking (one for each meal attendee), and when the *chubzeh di Purim* bread is served, each person plucks out an egg, celebrating the Jewish people’s victory over Haman’s evil scheming.⁵⁵

Ceremonial bread shaping has come a long way since the mysteriously-molded *lechem panim* of biblical times; these examples are only among the most well-known challah shaping traditions, a fraction of the shapes that have emerged in different times and places for various religious, spiritual, cultural, or personal reasons. Challah shaping and baking has undergone a revival of sorts in recent decades. Given the popularity of challah in America—its ubiquity in bakeries, grocery stores, and french toast dishes from diners to fancy restaurants across America is such that many non-Jews do not even know the bread’s Jewish origins or significance—efforts, even subconscious ones, to reclaim challah as a particularly Jewish cultural inheritance seem fitting for this time period. Modern updates, including challot with unusual fillings, ingredients, and toppings, and challah shaping as an art form, are spread through cookbooks and social media accounts and continue to feed challah’s rising popularity as a representative, symbolic Jewish food.⁵⁶ These contemporary takes on challah also speak to our unique moment in Jewish history; challah is one of the few loci on which the increasing number of Jews who identify as cultural or non-religious, as well as religious and/or spiritually-oriented Jews of all denominations, are able to come together with equal levels of enjoyment, access, and license to innovate.⁵⁷ Challah has earned

⁵⁵ Glazer, *A Blessing of Bread*, 202-206; Reider, *The Hallah Book*, 20

⁵⁶ A Master’s thesis by Gabriella Hersch from Brandeis University, “Challah and Its Performance of American Jewish Identity from the Mid-19th to Early 21st Century” aptly covers this phenomenon (36-50).

⁵⁷ Despite the overwhelming sense of commonality, there are some potential tensions that can arise when a significant food has different meanings attributed by different people who all claim the food as part of their tradition, as a review of Joan Nathan’s seminal *Jewish Cooking in America* aptly notes on a challah recipe which suggests *hafrashat challah* as an optional step; depending on the baker, the notion that this step could be optional might be sacrilegious. (Garvey, “Familiar Foods: Jewish Cooking in America,” 109)

its place as the centerpiece of the Shabbat and holiday table through millennia of religious, cultural, technological, and culinary innovation from all over the world, and because of this rich background, continues to serve as a delicious canvas for Jewish innovation in the present day.

How to Use This Book

This book is divided into four main parts: this introduction, which offers context and history for the use of challah as an artistic and religious material; then two sections of commentary—one on the *parshiyot* (weekly readings) of the Torah, and one on the major holidays and months of the Jewish year—each of which features my interpretive challot, a *d'rash* (commentary) that arises from it, as well as reflections and creative prompts; finally, an appendix with a toolbox of techniques for creating your own interpretive challot.

Here are a few suggestions for how to use these components:

For Individuals: Inspiration Without Intimidation

If you have always wanted to start making challah for Shabbat or holidays (or, you know, Tuesdays), let this be the inspiration you need to give it a try. The back of the book features basic recipes with detailed dough-making and shaping instructions to get you started. The process of making something nourishing and delicious for family, friends, and yourself with your own two hands is incredibly rewarding, and nothing elevates a Shabbat table like a fresh, homemade challah.

If you bake challah regularly, let this be your inspiration to get creative. If you can make a three-stranded braid, you already have the skills you need to make many of the shapes in this book. Use the primer of basic shapes in the back to learn some new techniques, and try your hand at some creative shaping. You can work your way through the Torah or holiday cycle with riffs on the designs you find in this book, or you can make new designs that are entirely your own, based on the creative prompts in each chapter or your own engagement with text and tradition.

If you are not planning to make challah any time soon, this book is for you too. Let it serve as a jumping off point for Torah study, or inspiration to tackle Jewish learning through other creative lenses: painting, decorative hummus-swirling, writing, or whatever gets your creative juices going. Take your cue from the reflections and creative prompts in each chapter, as well as the sections on challah as an interpretive medium, and substitute your material of choice. Happy interpreting!

For Families: Floury Fun

It's okay to make a mess! Making a batch of challah dough with kids and letting them make the challot of their dreams with it is a great way to foster Jewish engagement and positive Shabbat and holiday memories at home from a young age. Older kids can be encouraged to design challot that reflect a story or idea from the weekly parasha or holiday story (a great thing to read and plan while the dough is rising); some might prefer to try to reverse-engineer designs from this book.

For a less-messy alternative, the chapters of this book present concise ideas from the weekly parshiot and holidays, both visually and in writing. Taking a little time on Shabbat and/or holidays to study the parasha together could involve studying the relevant chapter and asking questions about it. In addition to the reflections and prompts in each chapter, you might ask: what does this design remind you of? How do you understand this verse? What do you learn from this commentary? What would you draw/shape/make to interpret this verse/idea? Paper and markers and clay are also interpretive media—let all of those ideas come out with hands instead of, or in addition to, words!

For Educators: Enabling Exciting Exegesis

Loris Malaguzzi, founder of the Reggio-Emilia Approach to Early Childhood Education, teaches that we are born with the ability to communicate in hundreds of languages— clay, paint, dance, sand, wire, thread, percussion, speech, pencil, dough, and more. Since our education systems tend not to encourage creative expression in these languages, many remain underdeveloped, particularly to the detriment of learners to express themselves best through the work of their hands. Offering opportunities for learners (children *and* adults) to approach Torah study and Jewish learning through challah enables a sensory, intellectual, and creative experience, one that might even open previously closed doors to Jewish learning for students who struggle with traditional methods of study.

Any of the uses listed above for individuals and families can be adapted to fit any kind of learning environment. Here are a few additional suggestions more specifically suited to educational settings:

1. Special event: an interpretive challah class. Begin by making dough together (this could include background into the role of challah in Jewish culture, or the Torah, or the science of bread dough, or anything else that appeals to your learners). While the dough rises, use playdoh to teach the basic primer of dough shapes (if you are short on time, use pre-made dough and begin here), then pair learners in *chevrutaya* (study pairs) and give them a text to study interpret (the weekly parasha, a holiday story, a text connected to Jewish values, whatever fits your situation). Once the dough is ready, let them create interpretive challah designs, and share them with each other. You can either send them home to be baked or bake them where you are, if that is an option.

2. Food-free version: if making actual challah is not an option, use playdoh or clay to work through the same process. Paper and markers will also work in a pinch, but the sensory experience is not quite the same.
3. A creative starter for Torah study: begin with the image of the parasha's challah design, with or without the accompanying verse. Encourage learners to interpret the design— some are more abstract than others, and could lead to some interesting interpretations. If you did not provide the verse, you might have learners try to figure out which verse in the parasha best fits the design. This could lead into any number of different lessons, or to the food-free interpretive option above.
4. As part of a lesson or Torah study that utilizes midrash or other forms of text interpretation: incorporating visual interpretation alongside *parshanut* (commentary) or *midrash* (interpretation) broadens the range of perspectives, offers another way into the text, and encourages learners to take ownership of Torah interpretation in creative ways.

For Everyone:

This book represents just one of an infinite number of ways to creatively engage with Jewish tradition, and just one way to visually interpret each parasha or holiday. If a design speaks to you, that is wonderful! May it be an inspiration to you. If a design does not speak to you, that is just fine too. May it inspire you to create your own interpretation.

If you are not a baker or an artist, please do not be intimidated by the designs you see here. When I started this project, I had made about fifteen loaves of bread in my whole life, and have no notable skills in drawing, painting, or sculpting. At the end of the day, the real value of this endeavor is process over product—the act of making the dough, interpreting the text, designing a visual interpretation, and bringing that much more care and thought and

love to the centerpiece of your festive table is a reward unto itself. And besides, even if it does not turn out looking exactly the way you wanted, it will still taste delicious— and you can blame it on the yeast.

Genesis / B'reisheet / בְּרֵאשִׁית

<u>B'reisheet</u>	<u>28</u>
<u>Noach</u>	<u>32</u>
<u>Lech Lecha</u>	<u>36</u>
<u>Vayeira</u>	<u>40</u>
<u>Chayei Sarah</u>	<u>44</u>
<u>Toldot</u>	<u>48</u>
<u>Vayetzei</u>	<u>52</u>
<u>Vayishlach</u>	<u>56</u>
<u>Vayeshev</u>	<u>60</u>
<u>Mikeitz</u>	<u>64</u>
<u>Vayigash</u>	<u>69</u>
<u>Vayechi</u>	<u>73</u>

B'reisheet

[IMAGE: Seven braids, each depicting a day of creation]

“When God first created the heavens and the earth— the earth being welter and waste, with darkness over the surface of the deep, and the Divine Spirit swirling upon the surface of the water— God said, ‘Let there be light!’ And there was light.” (Genesis 1:1-3)

Commentary

Our story begins with creativity. The Creator, described in these opening verses of Torah as *ruach Elohim*, a Divine spirit or wind, begins with raw materials— chaotic elements, darkness, expansive space, water— and calls something completely new into being. Over the course of six days, the heavens and earth are transformed through two kinds of creative processes.

The first act of creation begins with a realization that something important is missing. This something had yet to exist, so first it had to be imagined, then (literally) brought to light. The second type of creation draws something new out of existing material by arranging it into new orders and structures. In the first few days of creation, and especially on the seventh day, the process of separation— distinguishing, identifying, sanctifying— is a crucial creative act. Creativity, therefore, takes many forms: structure and innovation, intentionality and separation, with processes and products ranging from simple to complex, abstract to concrete.

On the sixth day, God creates human beings *b'tzelem Elohim*, “in the Divine image” (Genesis 1:27). Being created in The Creator’s image, human beings are thus endowed with the unique gift of creativity as well. Human beings are encouraged— commanded, even— to become God’s partners as perpetual co-creators of the ever-evolving world (1:28). The first human beings exercise the divine power to create new identities and distinctions through speech and naming (2:19), they bring new, unique iterations of the Divine Image into the world (4:1), and even, through Eve’s initiative, acquire the capacity to change, to learn, and to be moral, creating new opportunities and circumstances of their existence (3:6). It is our

blessing and birthright to change the world through our creative capacities, in all of their manifold manifestations.

Reflections and Connections

- Creativity is often equated with artistic ability, but as we see in the Creation narrative, creativity encompasses many different forms and skills. What are the settings and materials in which your creativity, your ability to arrange something new out of existing building blocks, shines the brightest? When are you most inspired to create?
 - *Create it:* For some, creativity is most activated by a large blank space; for others, some boundaries are more helpful. Try dividing a piece of paper (or a workspace) into seven sections. Find seven different items or materials nearby that can be shaped or can make marks (for instance: a pen, yellow paint, mashed potatoes, glue, charcoal, sand, thread), and use one material per section. Set a timer for seven minutes, during which the only rule is to keep making marks or shaping the material in one section. You can space this activity out over a whole week, do it all at once, or anything in between. What do you learn about your own creative process when you reflect on this activity?
- If human beings are God's partners in the ongoing process of creating the world, what do you think this co-partnership requires of us today? What do you see as your unique contribution to the ongoing creation of the world?
 - *Create it:* Partnering with someone (or something) to create something new is not always easy, but it can lead to innovations that neither partner could have created on their own. Find another person to work with. Each person begins

with a blank piece of paper and drawing materials of their choosing. Both partners get a set amount of time to draw whatever they wish on the paper.

Then, trade; the other partner gets the same amount of time to add to what was already created. Trade papers again, and discuss how the process felt for each of you.

- The two Creation narratives in Genesis 1 and 2 feature different primary creative processes, marked by the use of different verbs for creating: *bara*, which is only used for God's acts of creating, defines the activity of Genesis 1; and *asah*, *yatzar*, *banah*, and other hands-on creation verbs which are also applied to human activity, are used in Genesis 2. Read through these two narratives and list as many types of creative processes and actions that occur in each one; how do the types of creative production in each chapter serve to characterize the scope, feeling, and underlying message of these two different stories?
 - *Create it*: When God forms the first human, the verb used is *yatzar*, a word used for creating that recalls an artist working with clay. This word is a homophone of *yeitzer*, one's inner inclination and drive. Using clay, challah dough, or a similar substance, start working with the material without any particular form in mind, and see what your artistic *yeitzer* leads you to *yazar*!

Noach



[IMAGE: Six-stranded rainbow]

“I will maintain My covenant with you: never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth....I have set My bow in the clouds, and it shall serve as a sign of the covenant between Me and the earth.” (Genesis 9:11-13)

Commentary

After the harrowing experience of surviving a Creation-reversing flood and then waiting in cramped quarters with pairs of predators and prey for the waters to subside, Noah, his immediate family, and two of every creature on earth made their way off of the Ark to feel dry land beneath their shaky legs again. These survivors were probably thrilled to be alive, but witnessing the end of the world surely resulted in trauma and fear that it could happen all over again with one more misstep. Perhaps this is why God's *brit* (covenant) with all of the earth's remaining and future creatures is repeated multiple times in different formulations (Genesis 9:9-17), and why the rainbow is given as a recurring reminder of this promise: this generation may have needed a lot of reassurance before they were ready to trust God and move forward with reestablishing their lives again.

Fixing systemic problems— in this case, a world that was corrupt and violent that only one family was worth keeping around— is not an easy task; sometimes, there is nothing to be done but to take the whole system apart and start over again. This kind of radical change is difficult and painful to go through, especially for those who cannot imagine or desire another way for things to be; but by cultivating trust and building the future together with those who are willing to see a new way forward, something better can grow forth from the well-watered wreckage.

For the generations that followed, even though the experience of surviving the Flood became a memory passed down in their bones, the rainbow remained; both as a reminder of God's commitment to sustain earth's inhabitants as a whole, but also of the ongoing danger of the kind of behavior that led God to wipe out the earth in the first place. Even if God had promised not to destroy the world with another flood, human beings have the capacity to do

the job ourselves if we are not careful. The ephemeral, beautiful rainbow is a fitting symbol of the precious and delicate symbiosis between the earth and its inhabitants, a balance which is our responsibility to protect.

Reflections and Connections

- The covenant that God makes in the Noah narrative is between God and all creatures on earth, not only with humans. Why do you think God explicitly included all creatures in this covenant? What does this story suggest about the ways in which humans and animals are connected, and do you agree with these implications?
 - *Create it:* If humankind was to extend its own covenant to the earth and all of the creatures residing on it, what should be included in that promise? What symbol would you use to illustrate the terms of that covenant?
- In a *midrash* on this parasha, the rabbis posit that the rainbow is a manifestation of a fraction of God's glory (Bereisheet Rabbah 35:3). Which qualities of rainbows, both physical and symbolic, connect to your own understanding of the Divine, and why?
 - *Create it:* For each of the different colors of the rainbow, choose a quality, story, or name of the Divine (you could draw upon Tanakh, the prayerbook, or your own theology and experience) that best fits each color. How might you combine this rainbow's worth of Divine qualities into a single piece?
- What are the systemic issues that pose the greatest challenges to society today? Choose one with which you are most familiar, and consider: would this problem be best solved by taking the whole system apart and starting over, or by incremental change, and why? What factors might inhibit either kind of change?

- *Create it:* If you could redesign the world from scratch, what are seven things that you would keep without changing them at all to help form the basis of your new world? Create a visual representation of how your “World 2.0” would grow out of these seven seeds.

Lech Lecha



[IMAGE: The word “*lech*,” made from arrows, with poppy seeds]

“God said to Avram: ‘Go forth from your land, from your birthplace, from your parent’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, And I will bless you; I will make your name great, And you shall be a blessing.’” (Gen 12:1-2)

Commentary

Just before this parasha begins, we meet Avram, who forever changes history through a moment of radical rupture: “Go forth from your land, from your birthplace, from your father’s house” (Gen 12:1). In response to God’s call, our spiritual ancestor—the sages’ paragon of faith, Maimonides’ first philosopher, and midrash’s original idol industry disrupter—pulls up his tent pegs and sets off with Sarai to build his promised start-up nation. They leave the lives they knew behind, and over the course of the chapters that follow, Avram and Sarai experience a great deal of rupture, challenge, and change as they journey through new lands, receive new names, and learn what it means to be the first of the *Ivrim*, the Hebrews (14:13), a name whose meaning suggests being outsiders, boundary-crossers.

This adventure may be in service of grand future vision—a great nation and Divine blessings—but that does not mean that the daily experience of living in the shadow of the future is necessarily grand itself. Cut off from their past roots and ungrounded in the present, Abraham and Sarah yearn for a tangible connection to the future, a legacy that will live on after they are gone. Their marriage, faith, and decency are tested as Abraham grows increasingly anxious about producing progeny and he and Sarah struggle with infertility. This results in Hagar, Sarah’s maid, being forced into motherhood in her mistress’ stead; after suffering abuse at Sarah’s hands, running away and having a Divine revelation of her own in the desert, Hagar returns and gives birth to Abraham’s first son, Ishmael. Though Ishmael will go on to become a great nation of his own, Abraham’s covenant will eventually pass to his second son Isaac, whom Sarah will bear at the astounding age of ninety in the next parasha.

While the first patriarch and matriarch of the Jewish people agonized over producing an heir, God was more concerned with building their spiritual legacy in the form of multiple covenants that establish a permanent special relationship between God and the descendants of Abraham and Sarah. It is this spiritual heritage of covenant, a connection based on commitment, not chromosomes, that is Abraham and Sarah's most powerful and enduring legacy.

Reflections and Connections

- The covenants that God establishes with Abraham in this parasha include all of the generations to come (e.g., Genesis 17:7). As that covenant was handed down through the years, it changed just a little bit each time, reflecting the different experiences and innovations of each generation, but maintaining its essential core. How would you characterize that essential core that connects the Jews of today all the way back to Abraham and Sarah? What are some of the factors that have enabled this core to be maintained and passed on for thousands of years?
 - *Create it:* The covenants in this parasha are both sealed with visible signs (see Genesis 15: 9-10,17 and 17:11), mostly made through cutting (the verb used in Hebrew for making a covenant is *karah*, cut). Using cut-up pieces of paper or other materials, what sign or symbol would you make that reflects the Jewish covenant today as you understand it?
- In order to become the founders of a new nation and a new religion, Avram and Sarai had to heed the call of *lech lecha*, leaving behind the comfort of what they knew, and setting out on a journey into the unknown very late in life. Over the journey of your

life, when have you chosen, or were obligated, to make a change and leave something important behind you? What have you carried with you from one transition to the next? What do you hope to leave for those who come after you?

- *Create it:* Choose a literal or symbolic object that represents something which you have carried with you throughout the transitions in your life thus far.

Create a duplicate or another representation of that object, and add different marks to this copy that tell the story of the wear and tear, and growth and change from each of the transitions through which it accompanied you.

- God promises Abraham, “I will bless you; I will make your name great, And you shall be a blessing” (12:2). What do you think each of these promises mean: to be blessed, to have a great name, to be a blessing? Where do you see examples of these promises coming to fruition for Abraham, either within this parasha or in Jewish tradition more broadly? Who are other figures, from Jewish tradition or elsewhere, who exemplify each of these types of blessings?

- *Create it:* It is customary in Jewish communities to say of someone who has passed away, “may their memory be for blessing.” In what ways can a person’s legacy live on through memory, and how can that memory create blessing? Using faintly colored or translucent materials (watercolor, cellophane, white crayon, etc.) depict the blessings that an ancestor or famous figure has effected in the world through the legacy they left behind.

Vayeira



[IMAGE: Incomplete figure-eight, bottom half braided]

“Abraham built an altar there, he laid out the wood, he bound his son Isaac, he laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. And Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. Then an angel of the Eternal called to him from heaven: ‘Abraham! Abraham!’ And he answered, ‘Here I am.’” (Gen 22: 9-11)

Commentary

The *Akeidah*, or the Binding of Isaac, is one of the many challenging pieces of text in the Torah. Often, this narrative is interpreted as a test of Abraham's faith; a test which he passes through his willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac at God's command without hesitation. A last-second Divine intervention saves Isaac, and everyone gets to go home happy— well, maybe except for the ram.

This is only one way to read the story though. Because this loaded tale is told in only a short nineteen verses, with so little dialogue, much is left to be uncovered from the spaces between the lines. Abraham's silence, especially upon receiving the command to go and offer up his son as a sacrifice, is pronounced, given that this is the same man who scolded God in defense of the hypothetical innocent people of Sodom and Gomorrah a few chapters prior. Isaac says little before his near-sacrifice, and absolutely nothing afterwards; Sarah, of course is left out of the story completely. Not only do we as readers not know what each character may have been thinking or feeling, the characters themselves may not have known what was going through each others' heads. Rereading the narrative from each character's perspective, with particular attention to the emotions they may have experienced at each moment, offers an infinitely complex array of interpretive possibilities for this story, many of which are not nearly as neat and positive as the one above.

In the absence of much revealing dialogue, the imagery of gestures speaks loudly to the emotional tenor of this episode. In the climactic moment of Genesis 22:9-11, the contrast between Isaac, bound, and Abraham and the angel, both reaching out— one to kill, and the other to save— captures the tension and conflict that pervades the *Akeidah*. This tension endures to the present generation as well, as we struggle between competing bonds and

desperately reach for what we hope is right, never knowing for certain whether or not our answers match the questions on the tests we are given.

Reflections and Connections

- This challah design tries to capture the emotional tension of being bound (physically or otherwise) and reaching out (for help, or to help). Who, or what, do you see in this shape? How might you connect it to each character in the *Akeidah* (Genesis 22: 1-19), including Sarah, who is not mentioned, and minor characters like the angel and the ram?
 - *Create it:* Retell the story of the *Akeidah* from the perspective of Isaac or Sarah, imagining where they could have been, what they could have thought, how they could have felt, at each point in the narrative. Try creating this retelling in movement, poetry, or through comic panels.
- Three times over the course of the *Akeidah* narrative, Abraham responds to someone calling his name with “*hineini*, here I am” (Genesis 22:1,7,11). *Hineini* is a significant word in Tanakh, appearing relatively infrequently and usually preceding an important mission or calling. Compare the three *hineinis* in this story; what similarities or connections do you find between them, and in what ways do they differ? How is each of these moments significant for Abraham?
 - *Create it:* How do you think Abraham felt at each of these three *hineini* moments? Create a visual representation that reflects the emotions you feel are embedded in each one.

- When have you found yourself pulled between competing bonds— whether to people, beliefs, motivations, desires, etc.— and unsure as to which to prioritize? What were the central values that were in conflict for you? How did you end up deciding what to do? Do you think you made the right decision? Why or why not?
 - *Create it:* Recall a time when you had to fully commit to a significant decision, with no way of knowing for certain if you were making the right call. Process this experience through a piece of art in which you work without erasing or pausing to decide what to do next. Reflect afterwards on the similarities and differences between these two experiences.

Chayei Sarah



[IMAGE: Circle of rosettes, white bowl in center]

“I had scarcely finished praying in my heart when Rebecca came out with her jar on her shoulder and went down to the well and drew water. I said to her, “Please give me a drink,” and she quickly lowered her jar and said, “Drink, and I will also water your camels.” (Gen 24:45-6)

Commentary

Parashat Chayei Sarah, “The Life of Sarah,” ironically opens with the first matriarch’s death, signaling the start of a shift towards the next generation’s story. Sensing this movement, Abraham sends his servant Eliezer back to his homeland to find a wife for his son, Isaac. Eliezer dutifully goes, carrying camel-loads of goods for a dowry, but worries that he will not know who the right person will be when he gets there. So, he prays to God for a sign— that the woman who comes to the well and offers to draw water not only for him, but for his camels as well, will be the person most suited to be Isaac’s partner. Sure enough, Rebecca arrives immediately thereafter and fulfills every action of Eliezer’s requested signal.

The well is a recurring motif in Tanakh; it is a place where neighbors and travelers would bump into each other, where young women would go to draw water for their households, and sometimes, a place in which protagonists meet their future spouses, kind of like a coffee shop in a romantic comedy. Jacob meets his beloved Rachel by a well (Genesis 29:1-14)— quite possibly the same well from which Rebecca drew— and Moses meets his future wife Tziporah at a well in Midian (Exodus 2:15-22). In each case, the (male) protagonist’s actions at the well, which usually involve some physical trial, indicate something important about their character. What is unusual in this particular well-scene is that Rebecca is the one who displays her strength and generosity by drawing water for Eliezer and all of his thirsty camels, which would have been quite a lot of work. Rebecca immediately seizes the active role in this scene, marking her as the more powerful, active partner in the forthcoming marriage. That Rebecca does not actually meet her future husband Isaac at the well, but rather, an emissary, reinforces Isaac’s passive role in their relationship.

Wells are sources of life-giving water, and a person who draws abundantly from that source demonstrates their care for others and their own internal and external strength.

Rebecca, who is introduced to our story in a flurry of activity by a well, goes on to prove herself a strong, caring, and life-giving matriarch, whose wit and confidence ensures that the covenant Isaac inherits from his father will continue in future generations.

Reflections and Connections

- Read each of the three well-betrothal type-scenes: Genesis 24:10-29, Genesis 29:1-14, and Exodus 2:15-22. What similarities do you notice between these three scenes? What differences do you see? What does each of these scenes contribute to or confirm about the character of the protagonist(s), and how does the narrative point to these attributes?
 - *Create it:* Imagine one of these scenes occurring in a modern context. How would you retain the key elements of the story and what it reveals about the characters while updating the circumstances, scenery, and dialogue to match a favorite TV show, movie, or setting from your own life?
- In biblical times, wells were sources of sustenance, places of meeting, and centers of communities. What are the places, people, practices, etc. that constitute your metaphoric wells--the sources you draw from to nourish yourself and others, the places where you make connections?
 - *Create it:* Choose one of your figurative wells, and try to render it visually. For instance: what would it look like to draw a pitcher of calm from a well of silence? How might you see love flowing forth from a person, without being

diminished? How does your community look when gathered around its primary purpose for meeting?

- The well is not the only site of a significant meeting in this parasha. When Abraham dies in Genesis 25, Isaac and Ishmael reunite at the cave of Machpelah, which Abraham purchased as a burial site for Sarah, and the half-brothers bury their father together. The last time that the Torah mentions Ishmael and Hagar was when Abraham and Sarah banished them back in Vayeira; yet somehow, word must have gotten to Ishmael that Abraham had died. What do you imagine the contact between Abraham's first two families might have been, or not been, over these intervening years? Accordingly, what do you think Isaac and Ishmael's reunion would have been like in this moment?
 - *Create it:* The well and the cave in this parasha are linked by strong similarities and contrasts in physical properties, symbolic resonance, and the events that transpire around them. Explore the characteristics associated with both the well and the cave in these chapters; do the similarities between the well and the cave foreshadow a positive reunion between Isaac and Ishmael, or do the differences between them signal a negative one? Create a visual representation of the reunion based on your conclusions, drawing on the cave and well imagery and symbolism you explored.

Toldot

[IMAGE: Intertwined circle, half jam-filled, half cheese-filled]

“God said to Rebecca: ‘Two nations are in your womb, two separate peoples shall issue from your body; one people shall be mightier than the other, and the older shall serve the younger.’ (Gen 25:23)

Commentary

The dysfunctional family drama of Genesis becomes even more intense as the third generation of Abraham's covenantal line is born. During Rebecca's pregnancy, she felt violent movement within her womb as twin fetuses *vayitrotzatzu*, ran around or crushed against one another, so much so that Rebecca thought, "Why would this be happening to me?" and took her concerns to God (25:22). God responded to Rebecca directly with a prophecy about the fate of her unborn sons, who were each a nation in the making—one people would be mightier than the other, and the usual social order would be upended, as the older would come to serve the younger (25:23).

Jacob and Esau's struggles in utero prefaced a lifetime of being at odds with each other. Even their personalities are depicted as opposites: Esau is an outdoorsy hunter, and Jacob prefers to hang around the tents and cook; Esau is Isaac's favorite and Jacob is Rebecca's; Jacob is wily and Esau is straightforward—much to his disadvantage against Jacob, who swindles Esau out of his birthright inheritance and blessing. Though Jacob is technically the protagonist, as the one who will inherit Abraham's covenant, he does not get to come out of this parasha looking like a particularly heroic heir. Jacob blatantly lies to his old and blind father, even bringing God into one of the lies, and steals from his brother with apparently no remorse. Esau, on the other hand, elicits sympathy through his heart-wrenching response to the discovery that his father's innermost blessing has been taken away from him, "Have you but one blessing, father? Bless me too, father!" and Esau wept aloud" (27:38).

One has to wonder how much the expectations of the prophecy that Rebecca received led to the painful relationship between these twins, and if the animosity between them might have been avoided if their parents' respective expectations and desires had not been placed

upon Esau and Jacob. This narrative also challenges us to examine our own impulses towards bias and favoritism. Our natural tendency would be to cheer on Jacob, our people's namesake ancestor, but the story makes this emotionally difficult at almost every turn. Pushing us to look beyond the obvious paradigm of choosing between opposing sides, the narrative encourages us instead to try to read holistically and empathetically. Only then are we able to understand the full truth of our people's story.

Reflections and Connections

- The text does not mention Rebecca's reaction to the prophecy she receives, but we do know that she ends up loving the younger Jacob more than the older Esau, and that she assists Jacob in tricking Isaac to deprive her eldest son of his birthright blessing. What might Rebecca's response to the prophecy have been in the moment, and how could it have affected her actions in the future? We also do not know if she ever tells Isaac the prophecy; notably, it has echoes in Isaac's blessing to "Esau"— Jacob in disguise— "Let peoples serve you, And nations bow to you; Be master over your brothers, And let your mother's sons bow to you" (27:29). Do you think that Isaac knew about the prophecy? If he did, how might this knowledge have shaped his actions, and to what end?
 - *Create it:* How would this story have turned out if Rebecca had not received this prophecy? Write your own midrash of Jacob and Esau's early years, using details from the Torah and shaping the story around them based on what you think might have been a result of the prophecy's influence on the twins' parents and what might not have been.

- Consider an experience from your own life, or perhaps from a book or movie, in which expectations placed on you or the character had a profound effect on future outcomes. What were the positive and negative effects of these expectations? Are the effects of expectations different when they come from someone else as opposed to when they come from within? Why or why not?
 - *Create it:* What does it feel like to carry the weight of an expectation? Explore this feeling in movement, or by creating a physical object which manifests the sensation of an experience you have had.
- Over the course of this parasha, our ancestors Isaac, Rebecca, and Jacob do not come out looking particularly exemplary, whereas Esau seems more sinned against than sinning. In their commentaries, the rabbis will emphasize Esau's flaws and Jacob's virtues, even going so far as to connect Esau's later descendants, the Edomites, with later historic oppressors of the Jewish people, such as the Romans, perhaps to correct this story in favor of their own biases. If we remove the lenses of history and the desire to bolster our spiritual ancestors' merits, what can the way in which the Torah tells this story teach us about ourselves? How does it feel to embrace both the positive and negative aspects of this story as part of the Jewish spiritual heritage?
 - *Create it:* Choose a part of this parasha to read from Esau's perspective. How do you imagine that he would tell this story? Capture his perspective and emotions through writing, music, or a visual medium. When you have finished, return to the text and reflect on how this exercise affects your perception of the story as a whole.

Vayeitzei



[IMAGE: (Double ladder of cinnamon spirals)]

“Jacob had a dream; a *sulam* was set on the ground and its top reached to the sky, and messengers of God were going up and down on it....Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, ‘Surely the Eternal is present in this place, and I did not know it!’ Shaken, he said, ‘How awesome is this place! This is none other than the abode of God, and that is the gateway to heaven.’” (Gen 28:12, 16-17)

Commentary

After securing his father's blessing through dubious means, Jacob sets out on his own, leaving his family behind to seek out a wife from among his mother's relatives. In the liminal, unnamed space that stretches between one stage of his life and another, Jacob lays down to sleep for the night and dreams of a *sulam* stretching between heaven and earth. Though the exact meaning of *sulam* is unclear, it is clearly some form of connection and conveyance between the divine and terrestrial realms. Angels, messengers of God, travel up and down, to and from unknown destinations and purposes. God then appears to convey the promise that God had given to Abraham and to Isaac, confirming the inheritance of the covenant that Isaac bequeathed to Jacob in his stolen blessing. Jacob, however, gets an additional guarantee beyond his fathers' promises of land and offspring, "I will protect you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you" (28:15).

Jacob's moment of revelation when he awakes from his theophany is profound, "Surely the Eternal was present in this place, and I did not know it!" (28:16), but he perhaps mistakenly attributes God's appearance and presence to his own luck at happening to fall asleep right at the gateway to heaven (28:17). He sets up a stone monument and names the site *Beit-El*, the House of God, as if trying to fix God's presence to this one spot. It seems that Jacob has missed the message in the vision of the *sulam* and God's revelation. The angelic messengers traveling up and down the *sulam* are constantly journeying to and fro, as Jacob will also do over the course of his own lifetime. Similarly, God's connection to Jacob is not limited to a single place or time; rather, God will be present with him wherever his journeys take him.

Jacob may have only become aware of the *sulam*, the connection between the divine and the human, in this moment, but as he himself notes— God had already been there, Jacob just had not been aware yet. Attaining this awareness is only the beginning of the journey; the real revelation lies in continuing to notice Divine messengers and messages in the steps along the way.

Reflections and Connections

- What exactly is the *sulam* that appears in Jacob’s dream? *Sulam* is a hapax legomenon, a word that only appears once in biblical Hebrew, so no one can be sure exactly how to translate it. The common translation is “ladder,” others use “ramp,” or “stairway;” the most accurate option based on its ancient Near Eastern context may be “ziggurat.” Make a list of other conveyances that you could imagine as a *sulam* (my personal favorite is a tractor beam!), and then consider how each of these interpretive possibilities affects your understanding of this episode. Does the message change if the messengers travel a different way? Why or why not?
 - *Create it:* Choose your favorite possible translation of *sulam*, and then consider the ways in which the messengers travel on it, as well as what they might look like. Are they carrying things? Do their particular missions affect their appearances? Illustrate this scene of Jacob’s dream according to your interpretation.
- Jacob’s unexpected encounter with the Divine is a matter of a shift in his awareness and perception, not in the Divine’s presence or lack thereof. When have you experienced a feeling of Divine presence, or a sense of connection with something

outside of yourself, when you did not necessarily expect it? What do you think may have precipitated this awareness? Is it something you could recreate?

- *Create it:* The practice of *hitbodedut*, being alone with God and voicing one's thoughts, prayers, questions, and feelings aloud, can be done anywhere at all, because the Divine presence is not tied to a particular place. Find half an hour to go somewhere on your own— nature is ideal— and speak aloud to God about whatever is on your mind. Afterwards, reflect on what you thought and felt during this experience, either through journaling or a medium of your choice.
- Divine messengers appear in human forms multiple times in the book of Genesis; recall the “men” who visit Abraham and then Lot, who turn out to be Divine messengers. The many angels moving up and down the *sulam* are coming from or on their way to earthly destinations; it seems, therefore, that such messengers appear more often than the biblical narrative might otherwise suggest. Where else in the Torah do you see a character, perhaps under the anonymous title of *ish* (man or person), who is in just the right place at just the right time to help a character towards their destiny? When have you encountered— or when have you been— someone who was in the right place at the right time to help someone in an important way?
 - *Create it:* Imagine that every person carries a Divine message intended for another person or people, but they cannot know what the message is that they carry or the person for whom it is intended. How do you imagine these messages look, and what happens when they are delivered? What do you imagine your own message would be?

Vayishlach



[IMAGE: (Sesame twist and poppy twist, entwined)]

“Jacob was left alone. And a being wrestled with him until the break of dawn...Then he said, “Let me go, for dawn is breaking.” But [Jacob] answered, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.”.... ‘Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have contended with beings divine and human, and have prevailed.’” (Gen 32:25-29)

Commentary

As Jacob prepares to see his brother Esau for the first time since stealing his blessing, he spends the days before in a flurry of anxiety-fueled protective measures. On the last night, however, after having taken his family and all of his possessions across the river, he is left alone, just as he was when he crossed that same river fleeing his brother so many years ago. And without preamble or explanation, Jacob is thrown into a night-long wrestling match with an *ish*, meaning “man,” but often used in Tanakh to refer to an angel in human form. Because of the ambiguity of this term and the mystery surrounding the whole episode, multiple interpretive possibilities have arisen over time as to the identity of this *ish*. Jacob may be wrestling with a Divine being, as the blessing he receives suggests; commentators have suggested the angel Gabriel and Esau’s guardian angel, in particular. Perhaps, Jacob’s opponent is human; he may be wrestling with Esau, or even with his own conscience.

Jacob is no stranger to contending with others; his fights with his brother began before birth, he tricked his father, he spent years in battles of will and wits with his father-in-law, and experienced difficult relationships with and between his wives. One of his usual tactics in these struggles is to simply run away, fleeing his brother’s wrath or stealing away from Lavan without warning. But this time, Jacob hangs on to his aggressor all through the night, even after getting injured, refusing to let the *ish* go until he has extracted a blessing. Jacob wins this time, not because he is craftier or stronger than his opponent—whomever it is— but because he perseveres and sees it through to the end.

The blessing granted for Jacob’s victory is a new name, Israel, is an endorsement of the struggles that have brought him to this point. Struggle, the *ish* acknowledges, is not always a bad thing, whether it is with God, with difficult people, with challenging situations,

or with ourselves. If we lean into the struggle, refusing to let go until we have arrived at an opportunity for growth— whether it is deeper engagement, a satisfactory agreement, a better situation, or greater peace of mind— we can wrest blessing from even the darkest of nights.

Reflections and Connections

- The new name that Jacob receives in his blessing, Israel, puns on the Hebrew verb *sarah*, meaning contended with, or persevered, and combines this with *El*, one of God’s names. One translation of this name, therefore, is God-Wrestler; and since Israel is the namesake of the Jewish people, we might be called the God-Wrestling people. What are the implications of this name for contemporary Jews? In which ways does this fit, or not, with your understanding and experience of what it means to be Jewish?
 - *Create it:* One of the central expressions of Jewish faith is the Shema, “Hear O Israel, the Eternal is our God, the Eternal is One” (see Parashat Vaetchanan for more on the Shema). How does it feel to substitute “God-Wrestlers” for Israel in or perhaps “Those who persevere with God” in this prayer? Choose a translation that feels most resonant for you (or create a new version entirely!) and use this as the basis for a piece that expresses how you relate to God.
- Unlike his grandfather Abraham, Jacob’s name change is impermanent; he will be called Jacob and Israel interchangeably for the rest of his life. Reading through this parasha and into later chapters of Genesis, where do you see evidence of Jacob experiencing a change as a result of his wrestling and blessing, reflecting his name change, and where do you see evidence to the contrary? What does it say about

Jacob/Israel that these two names are used interchangeably for the rest of his life, and what insights might it offer about human nature more broadly?

- *Create it:* Name changes are still fairly common in society today, whether they reflect a change in roles or relationships to others, or better fit a person's identity; Think of the names by which you are known and what each one conveys about you, then create a self portrait in any medium that combines these different names and the meanings behind them. Where are some of these names and aspects difficult to harmonize into one portrait, and which blend together easily? Why might that be the case?
- Some struggles are important to see through to the end because there is something to be gained from the experience, but this is not always the case, even in Jacob's life. Think of two examples from your own life: one time when you persevere through a challenge and gained something that you could not have gained otherwise, and one time when it was better to disengage from a struggle. What were the differences between these two experiences? How did you know to make the choice to stay or go in each case? What did you learn from each of these trials?
 - *Create it:* Where do you find the energy you need to persevere through a challenging time or a difficult task? Visualize and illustrate a struggle in which you are or have been engaged, bringing the elements that fuel your strength into the image. How does this depiction change your perception of the struggle?

Vayeishev



[IMAGE: (Coat made of multicolored spirals)]

“Now Israel loved Joseph best of all his sons, for he was the child of his old age; and he had made him an ornamented tunic. And when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of his brothers, they hated him so that they could not speak a friendly word to him.”

(Gen 37:3-4)

Commentary

The beautifully adorned garment that Jacob gifts to his favorite son, Joseph, is the locus for a whole spectrum of intense emotions that play out in the first half of this parasha. Love comes first: Jacob struggling with a needle and colorful thread, pours his heart and soul into this unique gift worthy of royalty that would broadcast his love for his son to the world. Pride and joy come next: Joseph, wearing proof of his father's favoritism, entrenches his belief in his exceptionalism every time the colors catch his eye. Envy and anger follow close behind: Jacob's eleven other sons, confronting the painful truth that their father loves them less, concentrate their hurt into anger at the wearer of the garment that symbolizes their father's affection. When their anger finally reaches a breaking point, the tunic becomes the site of the violent rage that the brothers wish they could inflict on Joseph himself—the fine fabric torn, the lovingly-embroidered embellishments ripped asunder, the vibrant colors dulled with rust-colored goat's blood. The tunic ends up as the opposite of how it came to be: presented back to Jacob by his unfavored sons, colored with hatred, the garment evokes devastated grief in the father who believes that his beloved son—who is on the way to become a slave to a member of the royal court—is dead.

Joseph himself follows a similar trajectory to his tunic over the course of these chapters. He starts off as a spoiled favorite son, so wrapped up in his father's love and his self-absorption that he cannot even see how reporting his dreams of grandeur to his glowering brothers would be a bad idea. Prancing around in his fancy clothes and prattling on about his dreams so stokes his brothers' anger that he ends up down at the bottom of a pit, then in a caravan bound for slavery down in Egypt. Even when he rises to the top of

Potiphar's household, a garment once again becomes his downfall, and he is thrown down into a dungeon on false charges of violence.

Joseph and his ornamented tunic endure a long and painful fall from grace in these chapters, having learned the hard way that when certain sentiments are made visible, they can attract negative consequences. The humility, circumspection, and self-awareness that he learns in this early part of his life are critical to his dreams eventually coming true, but they come at a high price.

Reflections and Connections

- Readers of these chapters of Genesis have noted the parallels between Jacob's deceit of Isaac with garments and goat skin and the brothers' deceit of Jacob with a garment covered in goat's blood. Where else do you find related parallels between the different generations of this family story? What sort of moral order might these parallels and recurring patterns indicate? What is the purpose of establishing these big-picture trends in the book of Genesis?
 - *Create it:* Develop your own backstory for Joseph's tunic, connecting it to a story from a prior generation. Then, using cloth, collage, thread, or another medium, render your own version of Joseph's garment in a way that tells this new story.
- One of the most poignant emotional low points in this parasha is in 37:23-25, when Joseph's brothers pull off his tunic, throw him into a pit, and then sit down to have lunch. What do you imagine Joseph is feeling and saying at this point in the story? How do you think the brothers reacted, and what might they have said and felt in

response? Consider how different brothers might have felt internally versus how they responded as part of the group, and their respective motivations for doing so.

- *Create it:* Joseph's tunic is widely thought of as a multicolored garment; perhaps the color spectrum of the tunic reflects the spectrum of the emotions attached to it by different parties. Assign different colors to each of the characters in this story based on the emotions that the coat brings out in them, and create a design that uses these colors to convey the emotional spectrum of Genesis 37.
- Some of the hard lessons that Joseph learns in this parasha are the result of his own words and actions, and some are the consequences of being the object of other people's externalized emotions. When have you experienced a hard lesson that came as a result of something you said or did to someone else? When have you been hurt by someone else's speech or actions that were about them, but centered on you? How did each of these experiences impact you going forward?
 - *Create it:* Even innocently meant words or acts can ripple out into unintended harmful outcomes. Using movement, music, or a visual medium, depict how a seemingly positive action can smoothly morph into a negative consequence, or how an action could look simultaneously positive from one angle and negative from another, using the example of this parasha or one from your own experience.

Mikeitz



[IMAGE (Large braid being swallowed by a thin braid)]

“Seven ears of grain, solid and healthy, grew on a single stalk; but close behind them sprouted seven ears, thin and scorched by the east wind. And the thin ears swallowed up the seven full ears; then Pharaoh awoke— it was a dream” (Gen 41:5-7)

Commentary

In the previous parasha, Joseph dreamt of grain that foreshadowed his rise to power (37:6-8). In this parasha, he emerges from an Egyptian dungeon to interpret Pharaoh's dreams of grain— seven thin and battered ears swallowing up seven robust ears on a single stalk— foreshadowing seven years of abundance followed by seven years of famine.

Dreams are treated with great seriousness in the Tanakh, as they are often vehicles for Divine communication to both Israelites and non-Israelites and are considered a form of prophecy (Numbers 12:6). Pharaoh clearly attributes great import to his eerie dreams of gaunt cows and grain swallowing healthy ones, and believes in the prophetic nature of interpretation as well; even going so far as to give Joseph a massive amount of power based only on an interpretation which has yet to bear out, but which indicates that he has “the spirit of God in him” (41:38). Now that Joseph has matured since his days of blithely bragging about his dreams to his brothers, he seems to recognize the seriousness of dreams as well, and is careful to attribute his interpretive abilities to God's desire for the message to be received (41:16, 25, 28, 32).

Even though his own doubled dream from childhood has yet to come true in the moment that Joseph assures Pharaoh that God's warning will come to pass (41:32), Joseph seems to have never lost hope that it would. The actions that he takes—especially the bold move of giving Pharaoh political advice—perhaps inspired by those dreams from so long ago, serve to finally bring about the prophecy that his brothers interpreted. When famine afflicts the whole world seven years later, Joseph's brothers come to Egypt in search of food, where they end up before their long-lost brother, now second-in-command of Egypt and in

charge of all food rationing. Unsuspectingly, they bow low before Joseph (42:6), just like the bushels of wheat in his dream (37:7-8).

Whether dreams are one-sixtieth of prophecy as the rabbis claimed (B. Berachot 57b), windows into the subconscious as Freud later posited, or the fully conscious manifestations of our hopes for the future—our dreams have power. More importantly, believing in positive interpretations of our dreams, and helping others believe in the importance of their own dreams, can have the power to make them come true. Having a dream is not enough on its own, but when it inspires us to act, dreams can lead to bringing about new realities.

Reflections and Connections:

- Joseph's dreams in the last parasha were fairly straightforward in meaning, so much so that his father and brothers understood the meaning right away and interpreted the dreams for him. Pharaoh's dream is also very simple, yet neither he nor any of the magicians or wise men in Egypt could interpret them. What meaning(s) do you derive from the pattern of the dreams and their interpretations across these two parshiyot? What significance might be attributed to the particular interpreter(s) and their interpretation(s)?
 - *Create it:* In the second chapter of the Book of Daniel, a late book in Tanakh which is set during the first Babylonian exile, we find another foreign king who has a disturbing dream, which only the Hebrew prophet Daniel is able to interpret—the twist in this story though is that the king refuses to recount the dream first! Read the dream and its interpretation in this chapter and recreate its interpretation through movement or visual materials. Consider how your

perspective on how history has played out so far might interact with your interpretation.

- The rabbis of the Talmud have lengthy discussions about dreams and their interpretations (see in particular B. Berakhot 55a-57b), in which verses from this parasha appear as prooftexts. Many of the rabbis' aphorisms— like that of Rav Hisda, who said, “a dream uninterpreted is like a letter unopened” (B. Berakhot 55a)— support the idea that a dream comes true in accordance with how it is interpreted. In what ways is this stance similar to the biblical understanding of dreams, and how does it differ? Which is more interesting to you, and why?
 - *Create it:* Recall a dream that you have had, and create a visual representation of the dream. Without sharing this image, describe your dream to someone else and ask them to interpret its meaning for you. Create a visual depiction of your dream based upon their interpretation; how does this image compare to your original version? What stands out to you in a different way?
- Think of a dream— an aspiration or hope— that you had for your future at some point in your life that came true, at least in part. What were the factors that were most instrumental to your dream being fulfilled? Which of these factors were within your control, and what led you to act the way you did in each of these circumstances? When you went through dark moments, what inspired you to hold onto your dream?
 - *Create it:* What is a dream that you have now for something in the future? Imagine that dream becoming a reality; what will look different? How will you feel? Channel your hopes into a collage, a small sculpture, or other visual

form that can inspire you through challenging moments, and keep it somewhere where you will see it.

Vayigash



[IMAGE (Egyptian hieroglyphic-style eye, with tears)]

“Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, “Have everyone withdraw from me!” So there was no one else about when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. His sobs were so loud that the Egyptians could hear....Then Joseph said to his brothers, ‘Come forward to me... I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt’ He embraced his brother Benjamin around the neck and wept” (Gen 45:1-14)

Commentary

Throughout his brothers' multiple visits to procure food from him, Joseph played the role of a stranger. His brothers did not recognize him— after all, Joseph is twenty-two years older, wearing Egyptian garments, and speaking Egyptian—and he takes advantage of the situation initially to test or take a bit of revenge on his brothers, playing mind games and using his authority to frighten them, even going so far as to imprison Simeon. Joseph has a hard time keeping up the act though; multiple times, he is overcome with emotion and runs out of the room in order to conceal his tears (42:24, 43:30). Finally, after he threatens to imprison Benjamin but Judah steps forward to offer his life instead, Joseph can bear it no longer, and finally speaking directly to them in his native tongue and the universal language of tears, reveals his true identity to his brothers.

Joseph is something of a chameleon. Since he was a child, he has been adept at conforming his behavior to the expectations of authority— playing into his father's expectations as his spoiled favorite son, becoming an ideal steward for Potiphar, ingratiating himself with the prison guards, presenting himself as exactly the person Pharaoh needed at just the right moment, and then just as easily morphing into the role of grand vizier of Egypt. This ability is what keeps him alive and gives him power. But when his brothers reappear, resurfacing repressed trauma, homesickness, and even happy memories of his childhood, Joseph's tears threaten to reveal the cracks in the facade. When they finally break through, those tears— and the joy, relief, and love that Joseph expresses as they flow freely— may be one of the first manifestations, at least in his adult life, of Joseph being honestly himself. His authentic tears open the door to reconciliation with his brothers and reunion with his father, and they do not even cost him his esteem in Egypt. Finally, Joseph is able to match his true

colors inside with the many colors he wears on the outside, and that is an occasion for happy tears indeed.

Reflections and Connections

- Why do you think Joseph “could no longer control himself” (Gen.45:1) at this point in the narrative? He has wept at his brothers’ presence many times before, but always ran off to hide his tears; what is it about the events of this scene in particular that pushes Joseph to finally break character in front of them and reveal his identity?
 - *Create it:* If Joseph had a chameleon-like coat that was able to pick up the emotional ‘colors’ of the different stages in his life, what do you think that coat would look like at the moment when Joseph reveals his identity to his brothers?
- Joseph’s experience as an *Ivri*, a Hebrew, living in Egypt is similar to many Diaspora Jews’ experiences, especially historically; even though he has ‘made it,’ rising as high as he can possibly go as a foreigner in Pharaoh’s land, he may attribute much of his success to his ability to assimilate into the culture, and may continue to fear for what might happen if his ‘otherness’ becomes too apparent. Read through Genesis 46:31-47:6, which centers on the brothers’ occupation; how does Joseph’s assimilation anxiety come into play in this episode? How do the other characters react, and what do you think motivates these responses?
 - *Create it:* Consider a time when you have feared that you did not fit in or would not be accepted by a particular group. Create a two-sided piece that captures your internal and external presentation, emotions, or other reactions

to that particular situation. How might this illuminate Joseph, or the brothers', responses in the Genesis 46:31-47:6 scene?

- All of Jacob's children and their families, a party seventy strong, migrate from Canaan to Egypt to live under Joseph and Pharaoh's patronage. Most of those listed in the party are men, so the mention of Serach, the daughter of Asher, sticks out (Gen. 46:17). Serach bat Asher is listed again in the census of Israelites in the wilderness (Num. 26:6), and even though we know nothing about her or why she merited special mention from the Torah text, the rabbis took these two appearances to mean that she was the same woman, still alive. Many midrashim are written about Serach bat Asher and her semi-immortality; according to one midrash, she broke the news to Jacob that Joseph was still alive, and as a reward, Jacob blessed her that she might live forever (*Sefer HaYashar, Vayigash* 14). Look up Serach bat Asher and read some of the midrashim about her role in the Exodus narrative; which of these stories are the most interesting to you, and in which do you think her imagined extremely long life most benefits the people of Israel?
 - *Create it:* Write your own midrash on a favorite story from Tanakh or Jewish history which features Serach bat Asher. What is she doing at this point in her life, and how can her particular first-hand knowledge of history play an important role in this scene?

Vayechi



[IMAGE (Pile of rocks by a winding road)]

“And Jacob said to Joseph, “El Shaddai appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan, and God blessed me... Now, your two sons... Ephraim and Manasseh shall be mine no less than Reuben and Simeon....I [do this because], when I was returning from Paddan, Rachel died, to my sorrow, while I was journeying in the land of Canaan, when still some distance short of Ephrath; and I buried her there on the road to Ephrath”—now Bethlehem.” (Gen 48:3-7)

Commentary

The journey of Jacob's life is marked by the stones that he left in his wake. From the stoney pillow that became an altar after his dream of the *sulam*, to the rock that he heaved from the mouth of a well when he met his beloved Rachel, to the boundary marker he and Lavan set between their territories, to the monument he set up at Bethel after God blessed him, to the stones that marked Rachel's roadside grave. As Jacob reviews his life in preparation to offer his parting blessings and legacy to his sons, the memory of his favorite wife and the ignoble burial he gave her so many years ago stands out as an unresolved regret. In an effort to right this wrong at least in part, Jacob adopts Joseph's two eldest sons so that they will receive shares of Jacob's legacy; essentially doubling Joseph's inheritance, as if he had been Jacob's firstborn son. By doubling Joseph's portion, Jacob seems to be trying to posthumously grant Rachel part of the honor she should have had as his first wife.

Jacob may be trying to set things right before he shuffles off this mortal coil, but some old habits die hard. He is still favoring Joseph, a tendency that sowed nearly fratricidal discord amongst his children, and when he goes to bless Manasseh and Ephraim, he blesses the younger before the older, perpetuating the pattern that nearly led him to be killed by his own brother years before. And yet, despite being set up to follow in previous generations' footsteps, Ephraim and Manasseh break the pattern. It is said that they are the first pair of siblings in the Torah who have a harmonious relationship, perhaps by following the example of their father Joseph, who was willing to bury the hatchet and forgive his brothers for selling him into Egypt, since it all turned out to be for the good in the end (50:20).

Jacob spent his life trying to create permanent monuments of his memories, and leaves life in the same way, trying to affix legacies to his children through the blessings and

predictions he gives. But destinies are not set in stone, and we have the capacity to cut better paths than the ones that have been laid out for us by others. When we bless young people on Friday nights with Jacob's blessing, "May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh" (48:20), we wish for them a future of their own determining, one built through cooperation instead of competition.

Reflections and Connections

- Despite Jacob's regret that Rachel is buried by the road and not in Machpeleh, good still comes of this sorrow; when the Israelites are sent into exile by the Babylonians many generations hence, they travel along that same road to Bethlehem, passing by their foremother's grave. Rachel weeps bitterly for them as they go, and God hears and answers that they will return, for her sake (Jeremiah 31:15-17). Why do you think Rachel, of all of the ancestors and leaders of the Israelites, is able to successfully intervene on their behalf? Why would God agree to return the exiles to Israel because of Rachel's merit?
 - *Create it:* Lamentations Rabbah 24 imagines one possible argument that Rachel made before God in this moment. Write your own midrash—in prose, poetry, song, or a visual—which gives Rachel a voice in this scene.
- There is a custom in many families and synagogues to offer a blessing for children on Shabbat evening, both according to Jacob's direction, "By you shall Israel invoke blessings, saying: 'May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh'" (48:20), as well as, "May God make you like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah" (both blessings can be invoked over children of all genders). If you were to create a customized blessing

for yourself, your children, your parents, or anyone else who is important to you, by which biblical figures would you bless them, and why? Expanding beyond the biblical canon, who else would you incorporate into these blessings, and why?

- *Create it:* Find someone you love and offer them one of these blessings out loud, either a traditional or personalized formulation (you can also offer them the blessing in your own mind from a distance). As you recite each name, imagine the figure you mention appearing by the blessing recipient's side. After the experience, write, sketch, paint, sculpt, etc. the scene that you visualized during the blessing.
- At the very end of the Genesis narrative, we see a shift away from the sibling rivalry that began with Cain and Abel, to Ephraim and Menasseh's harmonious relationship. What were some of the benefits of the contentious family relationships over the course of the Genesis generations, and why might it be important to break this particular family tradition at this point in the story? In your own life, when have you experienced the benefits of competition, and when has cooperation been more successful?
 - *Create it:* Bring together a group of people to create different artistic renderings of Jacob's blessings to his twelve sons in Genesis 49. First, have everyone create their own pieces, then, create a cooperative piece on the same subject. Afterwards, reflect on the two processes, as well as on the end results. Which did the group as a whole prefer, and why?

Exodus / Shemot / שמות

<u>Shemot</u>	<u>78</u>
<u>Vaeira</u>	<u>82</u>
<u>Bo</u>	<u>86</u>
<u>Beshalach</u>	<u>90</u>
<u>Yitro</u>	<u>94</u>
<u>Mishpatim</u>	<u>98</u>
<u>Terumah</u>	<u>102</u>
<u>Tetzaveh</u>	<u>106</u>
<u>Ki Tisa</u>	<u>111</u>
<u>Vayakheil-Pekudei</u>	<u>116</u>

Shemot



[IMAGE (Burning bush)]

“An angel of God appeared to Moses in flames of fire from the midst of a bush. He gazed, and there was a bush all aflame, but not consumed. Moses said, “I must turn aside to see this marvelous sight— why doesn’t the bush burn up?” (Exodus 3:2-3)

Commentary

As far as miracles in the book of Exodus go, a lowly thorn bush afire on the lowest mountain in the wilderness of Midian is not the most eye-catching of God's signs and wonders. This may not be the way in which we would expect God to first appear before Moses, the prophet who will later and carry God's words to the people of Israel and behold the Divine presence-- but that is precisely the point. Consider what it says about Moses' character that he looked closely enough, and long enough, to realize that the flames were not turning the bush to ash, that he was attentive enough to notice not only what was happening but also what was not, and that his response to this sight was wonder, awe, and curiosity! And it is because of these character traits, which compel Moses to turn aside and see, that God calls him to his destiny as a prophet and leader.

But in order for Moses to experience this inaugural moment of divine revelation, there were several subtler miracles that had to take place first, the "holy ground" (3:5) on which Moses metaphorically stands. Reading this parasha with an attentive and curious eye reveals the moments in which incredible bravery combined with good fortune (divine intervention, perhaps!) saved Moses' life. Remarkably, women are behind most of the key moments that enabled Moses's survival in this story-- six amazing women, in fact: Shifra and Puah, the midwives who defied Pharaoh's orders; Yocheved, Moses' mother who risked her life to secure a possible future for her son; Miriam, whose quick thinking enabled her brother's early years to be spent among his people; Bat Pharaoh (the daughter of Pharaoh), who knowingly raised a Hebrew child in the royal palace; and Tzipporah, Moses' wife, who saves her husband from a strange Divine aggressor on their journey back to Egypt.

Looking closely and curiously at our world and at the events in our lives often unveils hidden wonders, subtle miracles that can alter our perspectives and change the course of our paths. By taking the time to pause, to turn aside, to look for the unexpected, these seemingly mundane moments become ripe for revelation, reminders of holy potential of every person and place we encounter.

Reflections and Connections

- The moment at which Moses turns aside to investigate the burning bush further offers a great deal of insight into his personality. How many other character traits can you deduce from Moses' actions and dialogue in this parasha alone? (Note: Moses' role as a shepherd would entail enduring the elements and fighting off predators, not just watching sheep graze! For example, Genesis 31:38-40.)
 - *Create it:* How long do you think Moses would have had to stare at the burning bush before he realized that it was not being consumed by the flames? Find a safe place to light a candle or small outdoor fire, and note how slowly or quickly the fire's progress can be discerned. What do you notice through this close attention to the flames?
- In the Midrash, the rabbis debate why God would appear in a lowly thornbush; some answers, among many, include: "it is a sign that [God] too is a partner in [the Israelites'] sorrow...to teach that there is no place devoid of God's presence....Just as the thorn-bush is the hardest of all the trees, and any bird that enters into it does not come out unharmed, so too the servitude in Egypt was harsher to God more than any other servitude in the world" (Shemot Rabbah 2:5). What other symbolic meanings

might you attribute to the setting of this divine revelation? What attributes of God does this episode suggest?

- *Create it:* This challah design includes symbolic elements that bring together different aspects of the story to teach something new about each; for instance, the six flames of this burning bush allude to the six women who bring about subtle miracles in other points of the parasha. Choose two images or events from this parasha and create one image that visually and conceptually links the two together. What connections does creating this image illuminate?
- Recall an instance when you experienced a moment of revelation in an unexpected time or place. What was going on around you? What was your emotional state? How did you come to realize that you were experiencing, or had experienced, something extraordinary? What were the aftereffects of this revelation?
 - *Create it:* Think of a space that you pass through frequently; maybe your neighborhood, or place where you run errands, and draw or write about that space based on memory alone. Then, go for a leisurely walk through your chosen space. Make a point of travelling in a different direction, looking closely at things that are normally part of the background, stopping and staring at one space for an extended period. Go home and re-draw or describe that space; what has this place revealed to you upon closer inspection? How has the emotional tenor of that space changed for you?

Vaeira



[IMAGE (Heart wrapped in chains)]

"And I will strengthen Pharaoh's heart, that I may multiply My signs and marvels in the land of Egypt.... And Pharaoh's heart hardened and he did not heed them, as the LORD had said.

And the Eternal said to Moses, "Pharaoh is dull-hearted; he refuses to let the people go."

(Exodus 7:3, 13-14)

Commentary

Seven times in *Vaeira*, we read about Pharaoh's heart. This may not be what we would expect to focus on so much in a narrative about miraculous plagues; but underneath the cinematic excitement of frogs covering every surface and fiery hail falling from the sky, this story hinges on the state of one person's heart, and what it means to be strong.

After each plague that God inflicts upon Egypt, Moses and Aaron go before Pharaoh with the demand that he free the Israelites to go and worship their God. And, seven times, for the seven plagues in this parasha, with the cries of his scared and suffering people ringing in his ears, "*Va-yechezak lev paroh*; Pharaoh's heart was strengthened/ hardened," and he became "*kaveid lev*; heavy/dull hearted, insensate." Pharaoh responds to fear by fortifying his heart, closing it off from the emotions swirling around and within him. Each time, he digs in his heels and refuses to let the Israelites go free. And each time he does, the severity of the plagues increases, his people suffer more, and the work of maintaining his show of strength and power and control becomes more difficult. His heart hardens, and hardens, and the pressure builds up, until finally, the pot boils over. Pharaoh is left with a shattered nation, and a shattered heart.

Even today, in our "keep calm and carry on" or "#goodvibesonly" culture, it can sometimes feel like difficult emotions are unwelcome outside of one's own head, that we become a burden to others if tears leak out onto our faces or anger creeps into our words. When we are surrounded by messages that being sad or scared or mad is undesirable, or a sign of weakness, and that burying these feelings is a sign of strength, it becomes all the more difficult to actually address those emotions, to reach out to get the support that we need to deal with the circumstances causing our distress. Though it may not be intuitive, it is the

moments in which we reveal our vulnerability that we show our greatest strength, and that we bring out the strengths of those around us who step up to help shoulder our burdens in response.

Reflections and Connections

- In contrast to the negative examples of Pharaoh's hardened heart, where do you notice positive examples of expressing vulnerability elsewhere in this parasha? Who responds to these expressions of vulnerability, and how?
 - *Create it:* In Exodus 6:6, God responds to the Israelites' cries with the promise of an "outstretched arm." What are some forms that an "outstretched arm" might take in response to moments of distress from episodes in Torah, history, or your own experience? Develop one of these forms into a different visual metaphor.
- When have you experienced openness or vulnerability leading to creating connections, or revealing the strengths of others? How has this felt when you have been the one expressing vulnerability? What did it feel like to respond to someone else's vulnerability?
 - *Create it:* Design and create a structure that is mostly open space, but which is strong enough to hold some weight. What are the factors that lend strength to this largely open structure?
- One challenge to this reading of the parasha is that since God takes credit for hardening Pharaoh's heart, it is difficult to say whether or not Pharaoh consciously chose to close off his emotional receptivity and responses. Even in the exclusively

human realm, however, it is possible to act or speak in such ways that we cause others to harden, or soften, their hearts. What are some examples of this from your own life, from books or film, or from your own imagination that might speak to how Pharaoh's response could be partially in and partially out of his control?

- *Create it:* Starting with one very powerful color, flavor, texture, etc. (black paint, for instance), experiment with mixing in lighter forms of the equivalent material (i.e., yellow paint) and see how long it takes until the original material is no longer recognizable. What happens over the course of this process? How does it differ when the process is reversed? What connections can you draw between this experiment and the effects of certain emotional states on others?

Bo

[IMAGE (Abstract dark squiggles)]

"Moses held out his arm toward the sky and thick darkness descended upon all the land of Egypt for three days. People could not see one another, and for three days no one could get up from where they were, but all the Israelites enjoyed light in their dwellings." (Exodus 10:22-23)

Commentary

Parashat Bo recounts the final three plagues, each of which brings an increasingly terrifying darkness upon Egypt: the eighth, a swarm of locusts so thick that it darkens the land and decimates the surviving crops; the ninth, darkness so thick that it can be touched; and the tenth, a dark midnight that claims the lives of every firstborn. The darkness of the ninth plague is the most literal, and yet, it is no ordinary darkness; the sages write that this plague is not merely the absence of sun or moonlight, but a tangible, mist-like substance that actively eliminates light (see Sforno). In these verses, we find that the darkness that descended upon the Egyptians renders them unable to move an inch, and unable to see another soul. For three days, each and every Egyptian is frozen in inky isolation-- in such contrast to the Israelites, who share dwellings full of light. The juxtaposition suggests that sense of utter alone-ness that the Egyptians experienced may have been even worse than the darkness itself.

Having one's ability to see unexpectedly taken away and replaced by a suffocating darkness is a scary prospect, but it is not without precedent; blindness has always been a possibility of the human condition. The text also seems to indicate that sight was the only sense lost en masse--not hearing, not touch. So why the implication of such separateness and isolation? Could the Egyptians have dealt with the terrible darkness if they had called out to one another, carefully feeling their way towards each others' voices through the murky gloom, or reassuring one another as the lightless hours dragged on?

Perhaps the penultimate plague was one of the Egyptians' own making. Unable to see one another, their impulse was not to reach out to each other across the dark divide by

alternative means, but rather to sink into inert solitude, to dwell in the turmoil of their own thoughts alone.

We are not strangers to darkness. We have known isolation, fear, and suffering. But our people also knows how it feels to have light-- that which helps us find each other so that we don't have to dwell in the darkness alone. Maybe this is why the Israelites enjoyed light in their homes; faced with the same darkness, they turned outward rather than inward, called out and clasped hands in the dark, and experienced the light in each other as they dwelled in communities of mutual care and support.

Reflections and Connections

- Recall a dark period that you experienced, personally or communally. What were the most powerful ways in which you and others created light in that time? What elements are common to a majority of these experiences?
 - *Create it:* Using only black or very dark materials, including the background, create a piece that conveys a sense of light or positivity. Afterwards, reflect on the challenges of this process as well as how you overcame them.
- The final three plagues can be seen as sharing the common themes of darkness (as elaborated above) and death. Pharaoh identifies the plague of locusts, which wipes out most of the remainder of Egypt's food supply, as "death" (10:17), and the final plague brings death to every firstborn person and animal in Egypt (12:29). In what ways might the plague of darkness be understood as bringing the specter of death--literally or figuratively--upon Egypt?

- *Create it:* The rabbis describe the plague of darkness as a mist that swallows up all light. What material can you find or create that comes closest to the rabbis' description, or your own conception of how a tangible darkness would feel?
- Sitting in total darkness, the Egyptians were alone with their own thoughts, and likely would have made sense of their situation in very different ways. This parasha's challah design is particularly open to interpretation; what images and emotions do you see in this challah, and how do they connect to the text? Compare your interpretations to someone else's; how do you each experience this image of darkness similarly and differently?
 - *Create it:* Spend about ten minutes sitting in a completely dark space, eliminating all sources of light as much as possible (please be safe!). Be attentive throughout this time to what you see and how you are feeling, as well as how both of these change, over the course of your dwelling in the dark. After you turn the lights back on, try to recapture what you experienced in abstract images.

Beshalach

[IMAGE (Splitting sea)]

“At the blast of Your nostrils the waters piled up, The floods stood straight like a wall; The deeps froze in the heart of the sea....Who is like You, O God, among the celestials; Who is like You, majestic in holiness, Awesome in splendor, working wonders!...And Miriam the prophet, Aaron’s sister, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women went out after her in dance with timbrels.” (Exodus 15:8,11,20)

Commentary

The parting of the Sea of Reeds, the miraculous Divine intervention that allowed the Israelites to escape the pursuing Egyptian army and finally— for the first time in over four hundred years— be free people, is one of the most iconic moments and visuals in Jewish tradition. What exactly this scene could have looked like, we can only imagine, but we do have some indication as to how it felt. Immediately after this physics-defying and nation-defining miracle, the Israelites broke into a song of praise, immortalized in the ancient poem *Shirat HaYam*, the Song of the Sea (15:1-21), which is still sung every morning as part of the traditional liturgy.

At the end of *Shirat HaYam*, Miriam picks up a *tof*— a hand-drum or timbrel— and leads the women in continuing to sing the song, accompanied by drumming and dancing. This moment seems slightly redundant, but it is actually rather remarkable, and offers a particularly beautiful glimpse of the lives of biblical women, whose experience has been preserved only in fragments. This scene is the only one in Torah in which the Israelite women, as an entire collective, are shown acting independently of the men; they are led by another woman, Miriam, who is not only given a name (a rare privilege for biblical women), but is also accorded the title of *nivi'ah*, prophet. While her prophecies were not recorded and thus left to rabbinic and readerly imaginations, there is a hint of prophecy in the *tof* that Miriam had close at hand.

When the Israelites left Egypt, their excitement at the prospect of freedom was probably intermingled with plenty of uncertainty, anxiety, and doubt as they packed in a hurry and prepared to leave the life they knew behind and head into the unknown. And yet, despite this, not only Miriam, but all of the women had the presence of mind to bring

instruments with them for the journey. They kept them close out of optimism and faith that they would have cause to celebrate soon, even as they were trapped between the sea and the advancing Egyptian army. And as soon as the moment arrived, they seized it, and brought the entire community along with them in expressing joy and gratitude.

Reflections and Connections

- The question of what the miraculously parted sea might have looked like has been the subject of imagination and debate for millenia. In one midrash, the rabbis sat in the *beit midrash* studying Exodus 14:22, trying to figure out what the walls of water would have looked like; Rabbi Yochanan supposed the water formed a sort of net, and Serach bat Asher (see Vayigash) dropped by to say, “I was there; the water was not like a net, but like transparent windows” (*Pesikta de-Rav Kahana*, 11:13). In more recent decades, movies have offered dramatic visual recreations, and scientists have debated natural phenomena that might have caused a dry path to appear through the sea. Based on your reading of the text, how do you think the parted sea might have looked? Why?
 - *Create it*: Imagine that you were an Israelite crossing through the Sea of Reeds; what do you see below, above, in front, behind, and on either side of you? Create a piece that captures your vision of the experience of crossing the sea. Afterwards, consider: did you choose to place yourself at the beginning, middle, or end of the crossing, and how did this affect the emotional tone of the piece?

- While the Israelite's victory songs and celebrations suggest that the primary emotion they felt after crossing the sea and watching it close in over their pursuers was joy, this may not have been the only emotion present in this scene. Read through *Shirat HaYam*; what else do you imagine the Israelites might have felt towards God, or thought about God, in this moment? How could they have been feeling towards the Egyptians who drowned? List as large a range of positive and negative emotions as you can, along with possible causes of those feelings.
 - *Create it:* Choose one of the emotions and causes from this list, and create your own *midrash* (textual interpretation) in writing, song, movement, or any artistic medium that develops another possible side of the story. How might this emotional tone color the singing of *Shirat HaYam*, or of looking back over the closed sea, for Moses, Miriam, or any Israelite?
- Faith and optimism also appear in the midrashic account of Nachshon ben Aminadav, who, upon seeing that the sea was not parting in answer to Moses' cries, walked forward into the sea (see Ex. 14:15) until he was almost completely covered by the water, at which point, the sea parted. What do these two expressions of faith and optimism have in common, and in what ways do they differ? When have you been optimistic or held onto faith in a particularly challenging situation? What effect did your optimism have on your actions and emotions during that time?
 - *Create it:* Miriam and the Israelite women's timbrels are a tangible representation of their faith; if you were to choose an object that represents your hope or faith, what would it be, and why? Render this symbol in your choice of medium, using colors that evoke optimism for you.

Yitro

[IMAGE (Mountain of downward-cascading spirals)]

“And all the people saw the voices and the flames, and the blare of the horn, and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they fell back and stood at a distance.”

(Exodus 20:15)

Commentary

When the Torah first describes the extraordinary moment of Revelation at Mount Sinai in Parashat Yitro, the words of *Aseret HaDibrot*, the Ten Commandments-- which we would think should be the focus here--are outnumbered by twice as many verses describing the anticipation and the aftermath of the Decalogue's delivery. The experience is clearly overwhelming for the Israelites; between God's appearance and the accompanying pyrotechnics, the people grow so fearful that they fall back at a distance and ask Moses to speak with God on their behalf. We get a taste of how mind-boggling this experience might have been in Exodus 20:15, immediately after the tenth commandment is pronounced, when the Torah reports that the people "*ro'im et hakolot*; saw the voices." We are not usually capable of seeing sounds, which attests to the singularity of this event, but there is another interesting detail here-- how could the Israelites have heard voices, in the plural, if God was the sole speaker?

The Rabbis come to answer this question through a midrash in *Shemot Rabbah*, "Come and see how [God's] voice would go out among Israel: each and every one according to [their] strength....since the manna which was one type changed to many types according to the need of each and every one, all the more so, the voice...would change for each and every one" (5:9). The Rabbis teach that God spoke to every Israelite in a different voice at Sinai—hundreds of thousands of Divine voices going forth at once, each tailored to the needs and understanding of one precious soul. Every person standing at Sinai that day experienced the same Revelation, but no two people experienced God's voice in the exactly same way.

Tradition teaches that every Jewish soul that ever was and ever will be was present at Sinai, which means that each of us carries a different Divine voice within that reveals a unique facet of *torah*. By discovering our soul's own unique voice, by seeking to understand the soul-voices of others, and by forming communities in which these diverse voices echo all at once, we continue to reveal new *torah* in our own day. The Revelation on Mount Sinai may have been a singular moment in time, but the Voices are still speaking.

Reflections and Connections

- This challah design incorporates several allusions into a Sinai-inspired shape, including the midrash from Shemot Rabbah 5:9 which teaches that the *kolot* went out in seventy languages to the seventy nations of the world and that they were personalized to every Israelite, as well as the mathematical concept of fractals. The fractal image produced by the Mandelbrot equation--nicknamed “the thumbprint of God”-- is an infinitely replicating pattern within a single shape, where the pattern of the whole is present in any smaller part (look this up-- fractals are amazing!). Fractals are ubiquitous in nature, from broccoli to blood vessels; some claim that the whole universe is actually one gigantic fractal. How might you use the concept of fractals to understand the plural “voices” in Exodus 20:15? Is this understanding compatible with the reading that each voice was unique? Why or why not? If not, which do you find more compelling?
 - *Create it:* Based upon your own reading of Exodus 20:15, how would you visualize the voices of Revelation?

- The Rabbis imagine God's voice adjusting according to the "strength" of each Israelite, as they also imagine that the taste of the manna God provided for them to eat in the wilderness changed according to each person's needs (Shemot Rabbah 5:9). What are the voices and the languages--understood literally and metaphorically--which speak most clearly to you, which nourish you, and in which you best express your own strengths and needs?
 - *Create it:* Loris Malaguzzi, founder of the Reggio-Emilia school of pedagogy, wrote that every child experiences the world and expresses their thoughts in hundreds of languages, many of which adults fail to encourage or understand (see his poem, "The Hundred Languages of Children"). Using the language(s) in which you best express yourself, create your own *Aseret HaDibrot* (Ten Principles) for living, according to your own experience.
- The verses surrounding the Ten Commandments, including Exodus 20:15, suggest that the experience of Revelation was probably quite overwhelming for the Israelites. As you read through the parasha, imagine the emotions you may have felt at each moment in this narrative. How might the Israelites have heard the words of the commandments through the filter of these feelings? Do you think these effects were intentional or not, and if so, what would be their purpose?
 - *Create it:* Using watercolors or other materials that can blend or bleed into each other, create a portrait of the emotions of Exodus 19 and 20, assigning a different color to each emotion you identify in these chapters. What is the overall effect of this portrait?

Mishpatim



[IMAGE (Scales of justice)]

“You shall neither side with the mighty to do wrong...nor shall you favor the poor in their dispute” (Exodus 23:2-3)

Commentary

At Sinai, the Israelites responded to God's invitation to be in covenantal relationship with the enthusiastic promise, "All that God has spoken, we will do!" (19:8), even before they knew what, exactly, that would entail. The first ten commandments then grow to twenty, to thirty... and they keep coming as Yitro transitions into Mishpatim, which fittingly means laws or judgments. These new rules, ranging from sweepingly broad to minutely specific, will govern their lives from this point forward.

Among these laws for living as individuals and in community, we find a few meta-laws that establish principles for upholding and administering justice, like the target verses for this parasha, "You shall neither side with the mighty to do wrong...nor shall you favor the poor in their dispute" (Exodus 23:2-3). On its face, this feels like a common sense foundation in a legal system; objectivity is an essential standard in a courtroom, and favoritism or bias should not be allowed to factor into a witness's testimony or a judge's decision, regardless of whom it privileges. Ideally, this should protect all parties within a system and ensure equal treatment.

The Israelites were fortunate in that they got to build a new society from scratch with these divine laws at the center. However, most nations today are built on older and less even foundations, and bias and inequality are often part of the structure of the justice system and of society itself. In such cases, when equal treatment under the law perpetuates systemic inequalities, what would be the optimal way to implement the spirit and the letter of this divine mandate?

Balancing the scales of justice isn't always as simple as "an eye for an eye" (21:24). The justice principle that appears most often in Torah is concern for the most vulnerable in society: "you shall not wrong a stranger or oppress them...you shall not ill-treat any widow or orphan" (22:20-21). This concern for the vulnerable, those whom the deck is stacked against, may nudge us to tip the scales in favor of equity, not merely equality-- and to keep working towards a society that is just and fair at every level.

Reflections and Connections

- The collection of laws in Exodus 23:1-9 are mostly concerned with issues of bearing false witness, protecting the innocent and the disadvantaged, and how these issues overlap in the sphere of justice. However, verses four and five seem oddly out of place, requiring a person to return their enemy's wandering ox or donkey, or to help them raise the animal if it falls under its burden. How might you understand these surprising laws in relation to the verses surrounding them?
 - *Create it:* What would be a contemporary equivalent of helping your enemy to raise their ox, struggling with its burden? Explore what this law would look like in your own life through your medium of choice, then reflect on the feelings this process evoked for you.
- "You shall not side with the mighty to do wrong" (23:2) has an alternative translation option, "You shall not follow the many for evil." The rabbis interpret this variously with regard to courts with multiple judges, which make decisions based on the majority rule (see Rashi on Exodus 23:2); many of these interpretations are concerned with the instinct to incline after the majority, even if the majority opinion differs from

one's own. When have you witnessed, or participated in, an instance where the majority decision turned out to be wrong or unjust? What role did the minority opinion holders play? What factors may have swayed some to follow the majority? How could this situation have been prevented?

- *Create it:* Recall a time when you held on to a minority opinion in the face of pressure to conform to the majority. What emotions were present for you in that moment? Create a composition that contrasts large and small elements to capture this experience and/or its attendant emotions.
- Equity and equality are sometimes used interchangeably because both words evoke a picture of fairness; however, the difference between them is significant. Equality treats everyone the same way, giving everyone the same type and amount of resources. Equity is more complex, taking starting position into account and distributing resources based on what is needed so that the outcome, not the act of distribution, is more fair. Which of these versions of fairness best fits within the broader scope of Mishpatim? Which do you find to be more fair? Is there a more just approach than either equity or equality, and how would you describe it?
 - *Create it:* Picture a set of scales sitting on an uneven surface. Imagine the process of trying to balance them; how do you feel as you adjust the weights on each side? If the scales begin to topple, do you try to catch them, or let them fall? Reflecting on this visualization, create a new set of scales that conveys your vision of justice.

Terumah



[IMAGE (Intricate design in red, blue, purple, and gold)]

"You shall make a screen for the entrance of the Tent, of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and fine twisted linen, done in embroidery." (Exodus 26:37)

Commentary

Though the ground will not support permanent roots for the Israelites for many years yet, already, God instructs the people to “make Me a sanctuary that I might dwell amidst them” (Exodus 25:8). This sanctuary, the Mishkan, will be as portable as the tents in which the Israelites currently dwell, but far grander, made with precious materials and constructed to complex and exacting specifications, which are detailed in this parasha. One might wonder why an invisible God, not bounded to statuesque forms of silver and gold and wood, would require a home made of these very materials, set in the middle of a mobile encampment of former slaves, the vast majority of whom will never be allowed inside of the ornately embroidered curtains. Perhaps it is not God who needs a sanctuary constructed in order to dwell among the Israelites, but the Israelites who need to construct a sanctuary in order to recognize God’s presence within and among them.

The Mishkan is made from natural materials that are transformed by human artistry; a striking monument to the power of human and Divine collaboration that sits at the center of the society they are building together. It is a celebration of the material and skillful gifts that the Israelites contribute to the community along with the gifts that God gives to humanity: the bounty of the natural world, and the divine power granted to human beings to transform those raw materials not only into tools and structures, but into works of art as well. This manifestation of human and Divine partnership in the physical realm also serves to symbolize the metaphysical covenant between Israel and God, an ongoing act of co-creation.

Over the course of our history, the Jewish People came to recognize that God can dwell anywhere and everywhere, but the practice of building beautiful sanctuaries in which to encounter the Divine has continuously thrived from the creation of the Mishkan through

today. Art and beauty can inspire us to connect to the spark of the Creator within ourselves, to look outward to notice the sparks of Divinity all around us, and to seek out the overlapping fingerprints of human and heavenly hands in the shapes of the world in which we dwell.

Reflections and Connections

- A considerable amount of Torah is devoted to the details of the construction of the Mishkan and its furnishings; it was not enough, evidently, for God to show Moses the blueprints of the Mishkan and associated instruments (25:9,40), but these instructions had to be recorded for posterity as commandments that take up an entire parasha. Why do you think such specific instructions were given, and recorded, for what was intended to be an ultimately temporary structure?
 - *Create it:* Dream up an idea for a structure to be built out of any material (blocks, crackers, clay, etc.), and write a set of instructions for another person to follow to build that structure, without including a drawing of the intended final product. Find a willing builder, and ask them to follow your written instructions only. How does the structure compare to your vision? What were your feelings at different stages of its construction and completion?
- Reflect on a piece of art that you encountered— visual, musical, theatrical, written, etc.— which deeply moved or inspired you. What did this experience shift within you? How did it change the way in which you interacted with the world in that moment, and afterwards?
 - *Create it:* Choose one or more of the materials and/or colors mentioned in this parasha to create a piece of art that expresses an aspect of Divinity that you

find present in the world. In what ways does the raw material shape your vision, and how does your vision shape the material?

- Recollect different sanctuaries and other religious spaces you have seen, Jewish or otherwise; you might also want to look up examples from other countries, faith traditions, or centuries. How did you feel when you were present in each of these spaces (or how do you imagine you would feel)? What messages about the Divine, and about the human-Divine relationship, do the structure and design of these sanctuaries communicate?
 - *Create it:* Design your own sanctuary or space for encountering the Divine. Consider factors such as materials, colors, arrangement of space, location, lighting, and size. What motivates your choices for these individual elements, and what is the overall impression of the Divine that your design conveys?

Tetzaveh



[IMAGE (Twelve colored 'stones' set in a golden square)]

"You shall make a breastplate of decision (*choshen mishpat*)...set in it mounted stones in four rows...the stones shall correspond to the names of the sons of Israel; twelve, corresponding to their names...on the breastplate make braided chains of corded work in pure gold." (Exodus 28:15-22)

Commentary

Aaron must have looked otherworldly in the resplendent outfit that he wore as he facilitated the Divine service. All of Exodus 28 is dedicated to the details of how these garments and accessories were to be constructed by skilled craftspeople, using the costly donations provided by the Israelites, for the “honor and glory” of the High Priest’s office (28:2) Decked in layers of colorful fine cloth with bells along the hem, a headdress with a golden frontlet, and an elaborate breastplate made of gold and precious stones, engraved with the names of the tribes of Israel. The High Priest carried the literal weight of the whole community on his shoulders (28:12) and on his heart (28:29-30) when he performed his sacred work. No pressure.

The sanctified role and abilities of the High Priest were actually conferred by this elaborate outfit itself to a significant extent. The golden frontlet on the headpiece had the function of removing sin from sacred donations and gaining God’s acceptance of these offerings (28:38), and protected the priest from taking on any iniquity from the people (28:43). The whole ensemble transforms the wearer, “consecrating him to God’s service” (28:3). These sacred garments protected the High Priest as he represented the people before God, but they also separated him from and elevated him above the community he served—he literally had to wear a golden sign on his head that read “holy to the Eternal” (Exodus 28:36) at all times.

Aaron’s vestments, which he could only wear when he was working in his official capacity as High Priest (Leviticus 6:4), simultaneously lifted him up and weighed him down. His authority would be unmistakable when he was in this uniform, but as a preventative measure against hubris, that ensemble included the heavy *choshen mishpat*, tapping against

his heart with each step, ensuring that he could not forget the weight of his office and whom he represented.

The clothes, accessories, and badges of identity that we wear can function in similar ways when they mark us as representatives of a profession, a company, or a community. When we wear a white coat and stethoscope, a company badge, school uniform, or a *kippah*, our actions reflect not only on ourselves, but on the wider community who shares that uniform. Remaining conscious of the weight of our role through our garments, as the High Priest would have done, helps to keep our egos in check and remind us of those whom we serve and represent.

Reflections and Connections

- The High Priesthood may no longer exist, but his vestments live on. The Torah scroll, which is the holiest physical object in post-Temple Jewish practice, is dressed in elaborate coverings, often with silver crowns or *rimmonim* (bells/pomegranates), and breastplates; these accoutrements even attain a sacred status because of their proximity to the *Sefer Torah*, and must be buried when worn out (see MT *Hilchot Tefillin, Mezuzah, v'Sefer Torah* 10:3). What other connections can you draw between the ancient priesthood and the contemporary Torah scroll, Torah service, and other Torah rituals, and how do these parallels affect your understanding of each of these categories?
 - *Create it:* The ritual objects associated with the *Sefer Torah* fall under the category of *hiddur mitzvah*; the fancier they are, the more they glorify and elevate the *mitzvah* that they facilitate (in this case, the reading of Torah).

Choose another *mitzvah*, ritual or object that holds deep significance for you, and create a priestly-vestments-inspired adornment that lends additional weight to the meaning and significance of what you chose to elevate.

- Commentators, like the Ramban on Exodus 28:2, compare Aaron's vestments to the clothes that royalty wore in biblical times. What do you think it would have been like for other Israelites to see Aaron in his officiating outfit? Imagine that they also saw him in the equivalent of street clothes, how do you think they might have reacted? What are some contemporary equivalents to which this might be compared?
 - *Create it:* What do you think it might have felt like for Aaron to switch from his sacred garments to regular clothes? Create a multi-layered piece that envisions the emotional shift that may have occurred over the length of this process.
- The clothes we wear have so many functions beyond protecting us from the elements and keeping us decent in public; they can convey status, profession, and nuanced signals of the identities we wish to project, or conceal, from the world on any given day. What we wear can transform us into someone else— whether through how we are perceived by others, how we perceive ourselves, or both simultaneously. What are the garments or accessories that you wear that change your self-perception? Which do you think affect the way in which others see you, and how? What effect do these perceptions have on how you move through the world?
 - *Create it:* If you were to have your own *choshen mishpat* that you wore over your heart, what would be the most important thing for it to remind you of?

What colors, materials, objects, shapes, or words would you incorporate to represent this value?

Ki Tisa

[IMAGE: (Thirteen spiral buns, poppy seed gradient)]

The Eternal came down in a cloud; God stood with [Moses] there, and proclaimed the name *Adonai*. The Eternal passed before him and proclaimed: “*Adonai! Adonai!* a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; yet not remitting all punishment, but visiting the iniquity of parents upon children and children’s children, upon the third and fourth generations.” (Exodus 34:5-7)

Commentary

Moses has been up on Mount Sinai with God for forty whole days, and the Israelites begin to panic that their leader is not coming back. In their fear, they demand an idol from Aaron; he melts their gold into a statue of a calf and the Israelites proceed to break the first and second commandments. Meanwhile, Moses comes back down the mountain carrying two stone tablets carved by God, containing the laws he received over the past forty days. Seeing the scene below, he threw the tablets to the ground in his anger, shattering them into pieces.

God and Moses are quite angry, and both exact punishment on the faithless among the Israelites. But when God threatens not to be present among the Israelites during their journey, Moses pleads on the people's behalf and God agrees to reverse the judgement. At the same time, Moses asks to see God for himself—a rather audacious request which God does not grant in full, but compromises with an offer to allow Moses to see God's back and to hear God pronouncing the Divine Name and Attributes.

The Thirteen *Middot*, or attributes, as they have come to be known, focus on God's abundant compassion, patience, and forgiveness. Even the last few attributes, which seem to take a turn for the harsh, ultimately balance out in favor of mercy. Those who repent sincerely for their wrongdoings are forgiven, but since allowing blatant sins to go on and on unpunished is ultimately not a kindness to humanity on the whole, punishment, according to the rabbis' reading, is only exacted when three or four generations follow along the same paths of unrepentant iniquity.

These Divine Attributes may be exactly what Moses needed to hear after the Golden Calf incident, not only because Moses could be assured that God would not abandon the people that Moses had agreed to lead, but also because Moses too had transgressed,

destroying the set of tablets of the law that God had made. Notably, God only reveals these attributes when Moses reappeared at the top of Mount Sinai with a new set of tablets that he had carved from the stone himself, an act of repentance, a symbol of being ready to start afresh. With these attributes of mercy still in the air, Moses and God start again, recording the terms of the Covenant with a blank slate.

Reflections and Connections

- The Thirteen *Middot* overwhelmingly emphasize mercy and kindness, but only a few verses later, however, as God begins to re-outline the terms of God's covenant with the Israelites, we read, "You must not worship any other god, because the Eternal, whose name is *Kana* (jealous, impassioned, zealous), is a jealous God" (34:14). How do you read this verse in light of the Thirteen Attributes? In light of the events surrounding the Golden Calf? What other attributes might you add to these thirteen plus one, based on God's characterization from elsewhere in the Torah?
 - *Create it:* Both God and Moses seem to have particular things that really push their buttons and bring out their angry sides. Draw out your top five 'buttons' that put you on the defensive or ignite anger, lining them up along one side of a page. Then draw the top five things that you value most in yourself and other people down the opposite side of the page. What relationships do you notice between these two lists? Draw connections that link elements of the two sides.
- Later on, in Parashat Sh'lach L'cha, the Israelites will arouse God's anger again, prompting God to threaten to wipe the people out; Moses recites the Thirteen

Attributes and asks for forgiveness on the Israelites' behalf. It works instantly; God responds, “*Salachti kid'varecha*; I have pardoned, as you have asked” (Numbers 14:20). This set the precedent for using these *Middot* in prayers for forgiveness, and they have become a central part of the Selichot service and High Holiday worship. When have you seen similar practices— reminding someone of their good qualities in the hopes that they will live up to them— in other settings? Has someone ever used this tactic on you, and if so, what was its effect?

- *Create it:* Recall a time when you were able to offer someone forgiveness, despite it being difficult. What were the emotions and thoughts at play in your mind? What did it take for you to tip the balance towards forgiveness?

Through movement, music, or another medium, illustrate this journey to forgiveness.
- Moses carves a second set of tablets on which God records the commandments, but what happens to the first set that he broke upon seeing the people worshipping the Golden Calf? The rabbis believe that both sets of tablets were kept in the Ark that traveled with the Israelites (B. Bava Batra 14b). Why do you think that the broken tablets would be kept at all, and why in such a holy place? What symbolic meaning could you attribute to keeping the whole and the broken together?
 - *Create it:* Rabbi Simcha Bunim famously taught that each person should carry two pieces of paper in their pockets, one which says, “For my sake was the world created,” and one which reads, “I am but dust and ashes.” What are two opposite reminders— of brokenness and wholeness, of importance and humility, etc.— that would be helpful for you to carry around together? Create

two physical objects, representing each of these two ideas, and carry them with you for a week. When do you turn to each one separately, or both together, and why?

Vayakheil-Pekudei

[IMAGE (Open hand, with a spiral center)]

"The Israelites, all the men and women whose hearts moved them to bring anything for the work that the Eternal, through Moses, had commanded to be done, brought it as a freewill offering to the Eternal....Moses then called Betzalel and Oholiab, and every skilled person whom God had endowed with skill, everyone who excelled in ability, to undertake the task and carry it out. They took over from Moses all the gifts that the Israelites had brought, to carry out the tasks connected with the service of the sanctuary." (Exodus 35:29, 36:1-2)

Commentary

Finally, after many chapters of descriptions and instructions for the *Mishkan*, its furnishings, and the priestly vestments, the work of creating these sacred spaces, items, and objects begins. We learn that all of the costly materials for these projects were donated as freewill offerings by each Israelite, from gold to precious stones to fine linen and spices. Their hearts so moved them to give that the materials just kept piling up; Moses had to command the community to stop bringing gifts, because they already had more than enough to complete the tasks at hand (36:6).

While most of the community contributed to this shared sacred project by opening their hearts and hands and giving material donations, others devoted the skills of their hands and hearts to transforming these goods into spaces and vessels worthy of God's presence. Betzalel and Oholiab, the chief artisans in charge of carrying out God's detailed instructions, are said to be "filled with God's spirit; a Divine spirit of wisdom, skill, and knowledge of every craft" (35:31), and they, as well as the artisans who will work under their direction, are "*chochmat-lev*, wise-hearted" (35:35). These artists' hands channel the Creator, allowing the Divine spark within that could transform materials into something never seen before according to a design known in the artist's mind, a unique wisdom that connects heart to hands.

Both of these types of offerings were needed in order for the *Mishkan* to be built, material donations and the application of human skill and artistry alike. One type of contribution was not necessarily more important than the other, for they were co-dependent. As they answered the call to construct a sanctuary in which God could dwell amongst them (Exodus 25:8), the Israelites learned what each of their own hearts and hands could best

contribute to a common project, as well as how the community depended upon the different kinds of generosity, skills, and wealth of every one of its members. Sacred space and sacred community are made when open hands and open hearts join together, honoring what each one has to give.

Reflections and Connections

- In Exodus 38:8, we find that the *Mishkan*'s laver and its stand was made from the copper mirrors of the Israelite women who performed tasks at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. Rashi's commentary on this verse includes a midrash explaining that in Egypt, the women used these mirrors when convincing their husbands to keep having children with them, despite the harshness of slavery. Moses nearly rejects these mirrors as contributions because they are tools of vanity; God, however, interjects and says, "Accept them, these are dearer to me than all other contributions, because through them the women reared huge hosts in Egypt!" Ibn Ezra supposes in his comments on this verse that the women who gathered at the Tent's entrance were there to pray and receive instruction in the commandments. What do you make of these different takes on the women's merits and activities according to these commentators? What commentary would you add to this verse, based on your own imagination of the unrecorded experiences of these biblical women?
 - *Create it:* What if the mirrors melted down to form the laver were able to reflect their past and present uses at the same time? What do you think you would see when you looked into that basin of water? Consider using a bowl lined with aluminum foil as a canvas for your artistic rendering of that vision.

- Think of the communities that are sacred to you. What are ways in which you contribute to these communities? What skills, materials, and unique gifts do you bring to these spaces? How are these complemented by the contributions of other specific people in the community? What else could you be contributing if you opened your heart or hands even further?
 - *Create it:* The work or contributions of our hands are a means through which we can connect what is in our hearts to the world around us. Find a quiet space and carve out an uninterrupted length of time. Using your favorite medium, create a piece that brings something from your heart into the realm of the visible. What wisdom is your heart calling you to share in this moment?
- The items needed for the *Mishkan* were valuable, and yet, this community of former slaves were so moved to contribute to the project that they brought far more than was needed for the work. It is a beautiful example of a mindset of abundance, which is not always easy to cultivate today, when society tends to privilege acquisition over giving. Think of a time that you have not shared or given something of yourself because you thought it would mean you would lose something. Review the situation with an eye towards what you might have gained if you had given instead.
 - *Create it:* One way to cultivate an abundance mindset is to reflect on what you have, not on what you lack. Using a blank page or defined space, fill the area completely with representations of what you have in your life, from objects to people to skills and whatever else contributes to your happiness.

Leviticus / *Vayikra* / וַיִּקְרָא

<u>Vayikra</u>	<u>121</u>
<u>Tzav</u>	<u>125</u>
<u>Sh'mini</u>	<u>129</u>
<u>Tazria-Metzora</u>	<u>133</u>
<u>Acharei Mot-Kedoshim</u>	<u>137</u>
<u>Emor</u>	<u>142</u>
<u>B'har-B'chukotai</u>	<u>146</u>

Vayikra



[IMAGE (Circle of round buns with flour, oil and salt on top)]

"When a person (lit.: soul) presents a meal offering to the Eternal, their offering shall be of choice flour, and they shall pour oil upon it and place frankincense on it, and present it to Aaron's sons, the priests." (Leviticus 2:1-2)

Commentary

This parasha opens the book of Vayikra, which is primarily concerned with matters pertaining to the priests and the largely sacrifice-based worship system that they oversaw. Hundreds of specific types of sacrifices— involving different animals, agricultural products, and materials in changing combinations and made with different intentions— served as remedies for illnesses and individual and societal wrongdoings, as means of expressing gratitude, and as insurance for God’s favor, among other functions. These sacrifices would be burned in whole or in part on the altar, with unburnt parts going to the priests as their payment and primary food supply.

Several categories of sacrifices involved raw flour and oil, or breads baked with flour and oil; multiple forms of these *korbanet mincha*, or meal offerings, are described in Leviticus 2. Though the type of flour used for the *korban mincha* would be of the finest quality available— it is called *solet*, which probably referred to sifted (i.e., white) wheat flour— and the amount brought the meal offering was still the least expensive of all the types of sacrifices. Usually, the *mincha* was the option for one who could not afford to bring an animal or bird for a free-will offering (see Rashi on Lev. 2:1), but this gift would still be significant for a poor person to give; the amount of fine flour brought would be at least enough to feed one person for a whole day. Because this offering came at a real cost to the giver, it was said to have been accepted as if the person had offered their very soul (B. Menachot 104b); this is why, the rabbis reason, the word *nefesh*, which can be a person or a soul, is used in relation to the meal offering, as opposed to the generic *adam*, which is used to describe a person who brings an animal sacrifice in Leviticus 1:2.

While we no longer offer sacrifices by fire, we do still give of ourselves in many different ways, offering our time, talents, and treasure to those around us. The option of the *mincha* offering reminds us that when it comes to our time and energy and the sacrifices we make, quality matters just as much as, if not more than, quantity. The intentionality behind what we give when we can is a reflection of our souls, and every offering that comes from a place of love at a cost to the giver is worthy of honor.

Reflections and Connections

- To make a sacrifice is to give up something of value for the sake of something else regarded as more worthy. In the case of the Israelites within the biblical context, what was regarded as more worthy than the material goods that they offered up? Consider both specific causes for bringing sacrifices listed in Torah as well as broader concepts related to the system as a whole. What emotional or social factors do you think would be necessary for people to be willing to make these sacrifices?
 - *Create it:* Recall a memorable sacrifice— in a broader sense— that you have made in your own life. What did you give up, and why was it valuable to you? What was more worthy that justified the sacrifice? Informed by the emotions you can recall from that experience, create a piece that captures the transformation from one value to another that transpired through that sacrifice.
- The *korban mincha* ensured that every Israelite would be able to offer a soulful free-will sacrifice proportionate to their means. In a contemporary context, what might that proportion look like? Brainstorm a few examples of situations that would inspire gratitude and appropriate corresponding offerings in return, at different levels

- of cost in terms of time, money, energy, etc. Based on the examples you develop, what do you consider to be the equivalent of ‘offering one’s soul’ in gratitude?
- *Create it:* Develop a recipe, literal or figurative, for an offering based upon something from your own life for which you are especially grateful. What are the ingredients that most represent the different aspects of what you received? Which proportions are best matched to what your soul can offer? If your recipe is food-based, try making it and offering it all to someone else; how does it feel to do this?
 - After the fall of the Second Temple, the sacrificial worship system came to an end, to be replaced by a worship system based on prayer (see B. Berakhot 26b for how the rabbis connect the innovation of prayer-based services to sacrificial worship and to the patriarchs). What was gained, and what was lost, in the switch from making material offerings to offering words— both the fixed words of the prayerbook (*keva*) and the intentions of one’s own heart (*kavanah*)— in prayer?
 - *Create it:* Based on the example of the *korban mincha*, the intention behind the sacrifices given under the Levitical system mattered; in prayer too, the intention, or *kavanah*, behind one’s words is an important quality. In art, there is also an ephemeral quality that comes from one’s soul, not only technical skill. Create a piece that expresses an offering from your soul, without paying attention to how ‘good’ it looks. When you are finished, step back and reflect on your work. How did you feel about the process? What are your thoughts on the outcome?

Tzav

[IMAGE: (Fire made of many flames)]

"An eternal fire shall be kept burning on the altar; you shall not put it out." (Leviticus 6:6)

Commentary

The priests who offered sacrifices in the Mishkan, and later in the Temple, may have worn some fine clothes (very fine clothes, in the High Priest's case), but their work was by no means delicate. Offering animal sacrifices involved a lot of physical labor, such as slaughtering and butchering large animals, tending fires, and carrying piles of ashes outside of the camp; the work was messy, bloody, smokey, and smelly. These working conditions were also governed by highly detailed rules, with high consequences for mistakes, as we will soon see. The work of the priesthood was physically and mentally exhausting; what fueled them to be able to do this difficult and sacred work day in and day out?

One task of the daily maintenance of the Mishkan offers a fitting metaphor to explore what kept the priests going; there was a fire that burned constantly on the altar— an *ewish tamid*—which was used to keep the *menorah* lit and to ignite burnt offerings. The precursor to the *ner tamid* (eternal light) found in most synagogues and prayer spaces today, the *ewish tamid* symbolizes God's eternal presence. As long as the *ewish tamid* was kept alight, it could ignite any number of other fires without being diminished itself. But this fire could not stay eternally lit all by itself; it required care and attention in order to keep burning. The ashes needed to be swept away so that it could breathe, and the rotation of priests throughout the day would need to keep an eye on it to see when it needed to be fed or protected from strong winds. Manifesting and sustaining this symbol of God's presence in the world required human attention and care; and the same could be said for the humans who did— and continue to do— this work.

The fire within each of us that powers the work we do in the world is powerful and holy, and capable of kindling the lights of others as well. However, we need to take care of

these flames: sweeping away old ashes to give them room to breathe, feeding them by physically and spiritually nourishing ourselves, giving them the attention that they need well before they threaten to extinguish themselves. Self-care is sacred, because it is by keeping our own flames burning that we have the strength to do the work God ordains each of us to perform in the world.

Reflections and Connections

- What is the work that your internal *eish tamid*, your eternal flame, fuels you to do in the world? What are the kinds of things that feed or restore your flame, that recharge your mental, physical, and spiritual energy— either things that you do for yourself, or that others do? When is your flame dampened; what are the activities, living patterns, or outside factors that drain your energy? What are the warning signs for you that your flame needs extra attention, and what do you do when this happens?
 - *Create it:* Self-care is most effective when it is part of a regular routine, not applied only in emergencies or as a reward for hard work. Design a self-care schedule for the rhythm of your week, with at least one activity for every day that feeds your flame. Create a beautiful reminder system— a checklist, a box of supplies, envelopes to open each day, etc.— to keep you accountable throughout the week. Afterwards, reflect on how you feel compared to how you usually feel at the end of a week.
- The *eish tamid* on the altar, and the *ner tamid*, or eternal light, stationed above the ark in synagogues today, are symbols of the constancy of the Divine Presence. What associations can you draw between the properties of fire (or light, more generally)

and your understanding of the Divine? How is the *eish* or *ner tamid* a fitting metaphor for the Divine Presence, or not? Visit the *ner tamid* in your community, or look up examples of other designs; what are some of the other layers of meaning that you see or experience through this symbol?

- *Create it:* Based on your own interpretation of the *eish tamid*, design a *ner tamid* that speaks something which you hope will be maintained forever—a value, idea, experience, etc. Which elements, materials, symbols, and colors best convey this concept, so that it can be understood even by someone many generations in the future?
- Keeping the *eish tamid* going throughout the day and night and noting when it needed care did not appear to be a responsibility to a single priest. What do you imagine it would have been like if keeping the fire lit was the responsibility of one priest alone? What is needed to move from a system where one person is responsible for something to one of collective responsibility? What are the advantages and disadvantages of both systems? What would it take today to build a community in which caring for those who need support in different ways at different times is a shared responsibility?
 - *Create it:* We cannot always tend to our internal fire alone; sometimes we need extra support, but asking for that support can be difficult. Gather a small group of willing people within your support network, and each choose three concrete ways in which you could use someone's support that month; find a fair way to distribute these commitments of support amongst the group in ways that strengthen, and not diminish, each person's *eish*.

Sh'mini



[IMAGE (Divine fire encircling twin spirals, in the shape of a question mark)]

"Now Aaron's sons, Nadav and Avihu, each took his fire pan, put fire in it, and laid incense on it; and they offered before the Eternal strange fire, which God had not commanded of them. And fire came forth from the Eternal and consumed them; thus they died before the Eternal." (Leviticus 10:1-2)

Commentary

For a whole week, Aaron and his sons stayed within the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, diligently offering sacrifice after sacrifice, adhering to the strict procedures that Moses outlined for their ordination as priests of Israel. On the eighth day, Aaron and his sons made sacrifices on their behalf, and on behalf of the whole community, and God's Presence appeared before the people, confirming the acceptance of their offerings from the newly ordained High Priest. But then, disaster struck; for some reason, two of Aaron's sons offered a "strange (or foreign) fire," and a Divine fire consumed them in return, leaving them dead before their father, brothers, and all the assembled Israelites.

What exactly did Nadav and Avihu do that was so terribly wrong in this moment? Commentators have debated throughout the centuries, offering different explanations for why they might have incurred Divine punishment, such as hubris, drunkenness, deviating from the sacred script, deconsecrating the altar through the foreign fire. Others suggest that because Nadav and Avihu were "consumed" in the same way that the correct offerings were "consumed" by God moments earlier (both verses use the verb *vatochal*), perhaps their over-enthusiasm was not punished, but sanctioned. No clear reason is given, and Moses' not-so-sensitive speech to Aaron right afterwards, "This is what the Eternal meant when God said, 'Through those near to Me I show Myself holy, and gain glory before all the people'" (10:3), provides little additional clarity.

In the face of senseless suffering or death, we have a natural tendency to look for something, or someone, to blame, or to explain what happened. This can be productive in some cases, when it can help prevent future tragedy, but often, finger-pointing only leads to more grief. It can be difficult to accept that sometimes there is not anything that anyone

could have done differently to avoid a terrible outcome; life is not always fair, and it is sad, infuriating, frustrating, and painful to have to come face to face with that reality. Aaron's silence in the aftermath of his son's deaths is a poignant reminder that not every tragedy can be explained, justified, or blamed on someone; rather, our energies are perhaps best spent on continuing to get up in the morning, on finding a way to move from anger and grief to acceptance and healing, and on loving and supporting one another.

Reflections and Connections

- A huge question mark hovers over the short span of Leviticus 10:1-3: what were Nadav and Avihu doing? Why were they consumed by Divine fire, and what did that imply? What did Moses' enigmatic speech mean? Based on your own reading of the passage and its surrounding context, how would you address each of these questions?
 - *Create it:* In this scene, Divine fire consumes (*vatochal*) Nadav and Avihu, like the sacrifices Aaron offered on the altar shortly before. In Parashat Shemot (Ex. 3:2), Moses encountered Divine fire in a bush which was not consumed (*eineinu uchal*; *same root*). Create a representation of how you imagine the Divine fire to have looked, felt, and moved in each of these circumstances. Would it be the same or different, and why?
- “*Vayidom Aharon*; and Aaron was silent” (10:3) is a classic example of the Torah's laconic style, in which every word in a narrative is intentional, loaded with meaning, and also leaves much unsaid; it is also a study in the importance of translation. *Vayidom* can mean “he was silent,” but this verbal root can also mean ceased, stilled, wept, moaned, whispered, or was destroyed. Notably, *vayishaket*, which would mean

quiet, at peace, at rest, still, or calm was not used in this case. Using the context of the rest of the chapter, as well as your own experience of human emotions, how would you choose to translate *vayidom Aharon*?

- *Create it:* Find or take a series of photos that capture the emotion(s) that you think Aaron may have felt in this moment. When you gather the images and view them all together, what is the impression that you get from the collection as a whole?
- The deaths of Nadav and Avihu were both a personal tragedy for Aaron and his family, and a national tragedy for the assembled Israelites who witnessed the event. When have you experienced a national or personal tragedy that has propelled you to act? When has such an experience led to inaction? What were the differences between these two events and their effects on you? If you could change anything about your response in the moment, what would it be and why?
 - *Create it:* Jewish tradition divides the mourning process into different periods of intensity: *shiva*, the first week of deep mourning, *shloshim*, the first thirty days of moderate mourning, and *shana*, the first eleven months, the length of time that kaddish is recited daily. How would you express the different stages of grief and mourning? Create a piece that illustrates this process, based on an experience that you have had or have witnessed.

Tazria-Metzora

[IMAGE (Twisted circle filled with marzipan and covered with almond flakes)]

"When a person has on the skin of their body a swelling, a rash, or a discoloration, and it develops into *tzara'at* (a scaly affliction of the skin), it shall be reported to Aaron the priest or one of his sons, the priests." (Leviticus 13:1)

Commentary

Tazria-Metzora, the double portion full of periods, pus, and skin disease, probably wins the award for “most dreaded *b'nei mitzvah* parasha.” In recent times, however, the content of these chapters has become far more relevant to most people’s lived experience due to the COVID-19 pandemic, when illness, isolation, stress, and fear became part of the very fabric of society.

The text of Leviticus is particularly concerned with a disease called *tzara'at*, an affliction affecting the skin that is commonly translated as leprosy, but what exactly this mystery scourge was is not quite clear, especially because it could also spread to fabrics and walls. Whatever it was, it was visible and it was serious; those afflicted were forced to isolate from the community, “As for the *tzaru'a* (the person with *tzara'at*), their clothes shall be rent, their head shall be left bare, and they shall cover over their upper lip; and they shall call out, '*Tamei! Tamei!* (ritually impure)' They shall be *tamei* as long as the disease is on them. Being *tamei*, they shall dwell apart; their dwelling shall be outside the camp” (13:45-46).

The rabbis argued over why the person with *tzara'at* would need to call out "*tamei*," announcing their status wherever they went. Perhaps it was to remind others to stay away for their own safety, perhaps it was to remind the afflicted person to keep away from others as well. Others said that it was to stir sympathy in people who were well, so that they would pray for the affected person's healing. In either case, the Torah made a provision for encouraging connection between the isolated person and the wider community even across the imposed physical distance. Calling out “*tamei*” announced a need for extra support and empathy, a call which the community could then answer.

Illness, both mental and physical, is often endured in silence and isolation, especially due to social stigma and accessibility issues, and we all go through times when we need help carrying our burdens. Creating communities of care that enable needs to be named without shame and to receive empathy and actual care in return benefits everyone, and ensures that no one is left to suffer alone.

Reflections and Connections

- Many rabbinic commentaries connect these chapters to Miriam's affliction with *tzara'at* in Numbers 12 as punishment for speaking against Moses; *tzara'at* is thus often assumed to be the result of *lashon hara*, evil speech, or at least that it is a punishment in response to a moral failing. *Tzara'at* also happens to be the only disease mentioned in the Torah that required isolation as part of the cure; even when Moses pleads with God to heal Miriam, God responds that seven days outside the camp are required (Num. 12:14). If *tzara'at* is indeed a moral disease, what would be the benefit of isolation as a necessary part of its cure? Why might *tzara'at* be seen as a fitting punishment for *lashon hara* in particular?
 - *Create it:* Suppose you were a person with *tzara'at* in Torah times, sitting outside of the camp for seven days or more. Would you try to form a community with others outside of the camp, or would you be alone? What would you do with your time? What might you be feeling at different points? Write a short story, make a playlist, or create an image that captures the experience as you imagine it.

- Recall a time when you were struggling under the weight of a burden. How did it feel when you bore that burden alone? Did you reach out to others for help; why or why not? Did anyone reach out to you; if so, what precipitated this intervention? How did it feel to share some of that burden with others, or how do you think it might have felt to have done so? What can you draw from this experience that informs how you can respond to someone whom you know is currently struggling with something?
 - *Create it:* Think of someone you know who is dealing with illness or another major stressor, or someone who is lonely or isolated. What would be the best way for you to show them that you care and want to ease some of their burden? Turn this into something tangible and be sure to actually deliver it to the person you are thinking of.
- When the person with *tzara'at* has healed, there is an elaborate ritual for changing their status from *tamei* (ritually impure) to *tahor* (ritually pure), described in 14:1-32, before they can re-enter the camp. What benefits might this ritual have had for the person cured of *tzara'at*? What purpose might this ritual have served for the rest of the community? What are some contemporary equivalents of rituals that help us to transition from one state to another?
 - *Create it:* Choose a current or upcoming transition period relevant to your life— large or small, rare or everyday, something you are happy about or something you are not looking forward to— and develop a ritual to mark and/or ease that transition. How might you incorporate sound, scent, and sight? What objects could you use to effect a physical change that reflects the metaphysical change you are or will be going through?

Acharei Mot-Kedoshim



[IMAGE: (Rainbow heart, hugged by a braided circle)]

"You shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Eternal." (Leviticus 19:18)

Commentary

Repeating several times over the course of the Holiness Code, iterations of the commandment “*v’ahavta l’reiecha kamocha*; you shall love your neighbor as yourself” punctuate this long list of emphatic *mitzvot*. This principle is one of the highlights of the Torah, not only for modern readers, but for the greatest of the early rabbis as well. In an oft-repeated story of Rabbi Hillel, a person is said to have challenged the rabbi to teach him the whole Torah while he stood on one foot; Hillel responded with the negative formulation of this positive commandment, “That which is hateful to you, do not do to another. That is the whole Torah, the rest is its interpretation; go and study it” (BT Shabbat 31a). Rabbi Akiva similarly taught that “love your neighbor as yourself” was the most important principle in Torah (Sifra, Kedoshim 2:4.12).

Kedoshim features many just and laws that are agreeable and applicable in contemporary society, and some that do not hold up to modern standards. Unfortunately, among these are some commandments— including Leviticus 20:13 and its corollary in Acharei Mot, 18:22— which have been used to rationalize intolerance, hatred, and mistreatment, especially of queer folks, for thousands of years. The laws of Kedoshim are not exceptions either; there are laws and stories in the Torah that clearly condone misogyny, homophobia, slavery, and genocide. Reading these verses can be painful, and can challenge modern people who hold this text as sacred to either justify the presence of these words, or even to justify keeping the text itself.

The juxtaposition of some of the most enduring, beautiful, empathetic values of our tradition against laws that demean the humanity of the very neighbors we are supposed to love within the same parasha compels us to find a way to hold both strands of texts

simultaneously, and to interpret them for our own place and time. There are lessons to be learned from even the most challenging texts. Sometimes, the Torah serves as a mirror that reflects our own morals and characters back at us, inviting us to clarify who we are and what we believe through our reactions to what we see, and to act accordingly. “You shall be holy,” God commands (19:2); finding our way towards holiness in a complex and contradictory world is a task that we all face, and the Torah offers us the space and the inspiration to bring that learning to life.

Reflections and Connections

- The *mitzvah* of “*v’ahavta l’reiecha kamocha*; love your neighbor as yourself” is not as straightforward as it appears on the surface. Leviticus 19, with its repeated exhortations to love one’s fellow, to love the stranger, not to hate one’s neighbor, offers several concrete examples of what this principle may have meant in its original context. Based on your consideration of this chapter, what does it mean to “love?” Who is meant by one’s “neighbor?” And what might “like yourself” mean? Does this investigation change how you initially thought of this verse, and if so, in what ways? What might be challenging in trying to fulfill this verse in reality?
 - *Create it:* Brainstorm as many visual manifestations or representations of “love,” “neighbor/fellow human,” and “like yourself” as you can. Which combination of these three images feels most inspiring to you? Which poses the greatest challenge to actualize? Render both combinations as cohesive images side-by-side; what do you see in the similarities and contrasts between them?

- Rabbi Akiva’s statement that “you shall love your neighbor as yourself” is the most important principle in Torah is recorded alongside a conflicting opinion from Rabbi Ben Azai, who argued that “This is book of the generations of humankind—When God created humans, God made them in the likeness of God” (Gen. 5:1) is an even more important principle. What are the messages that Akiva and Ben Azai’s respective choices of verses each convey? What are the primary differences between them, and what are the implications of these differences? Which would you argue is the more important principle, and why?
 - *Create it:* Choose your favorite of these two verses, or another verse that reflects a core principle of the Torah for you, and explore in two- and three-dimensional media how that principle comes off of the page and into your life.
- Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 are not the only challenging verses in the Torah; find another verse or narrative that is particularly troubling for you— perhaps from this parasha, or from elsewhere— and reflect on what exactly you object to in this text. Which of your moral principles does it challenge, and from where does that principle derive? What does your reaction teach you about yourself? Then, find another verse in Torah that contradicts the first one; how do you react to this verse, and what can you learn from that reaction?
 - *Create it:* The Torah, as we see, contains a broad spectrum of ideas, including ends of the spectrum that even seem to contradict each other. Using the physical attributes of the Torah scroll as inspiration (think about the scrolling

structure, the look of the letters on the parchment, etc.), create a piece that captures how these ideas coexist and interact within a single document.

Emor



[IMAGE: (Plowed field, with sprouting grains in the corners and edges)]

"And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and for the stranger: I am the Eternal your God." (Leviticus 23:22)

Commentary

Amidst the observances of the sacred seasons and holiday harvests, the laws of *pe'ah* (corner, side) and *leket* (gleanings), given just a few chapters earlier in the Holiness Code of Parashat Kedoshim, reappear; serving as a reminder, lest one get caught up in taking in the abundant harvest and its celebration, not to reap the edges of the field or pick up grain dropped in during the harvest. *Pe'ah* and *leket* grant the harvest of the edges of every field, as well as any gleanings, to the people on the edges of the community: the poor and the stranger. This produce is not a charitable donation, given out of the goodness of one's heart, but the rightful property of society's most vulnerable members. These laws ensure that there is enough to sustain everyone, so long as we are mindful of the needs of others as well as of ourselves. One person's surplus is another's survival.

Pe'ah and *leket* are interesting as positive commandments, because they are passive; they involve taking a step back, leaving part of the harvest un-done, rather than taking a step forward to offer a donation, for instance. This stepping back, this pause in action, creates fertile open space for reflection on what it is that one really needs, and space into which someone else can step forward and glean what they need. This act of not-taking that which one does not need may seem like a small gesture, but it is a holy one, making space into which God's open hand can reach.

Creating open space for give-and-take based on what we need is not limited to farmers with fields full of food, or even to physical needs at all. We can give so much through the act of stepping back to create emotional space on the borders of our interactions with each other: leaving room to give someone a little extra of our patience or compassion

when they need it, and stepping into the space to draw upon someone else's support when we ourselves are inevitably in need.

Reflections and Connections

- The laws of *pe'ah* and *leket* create gain through an act of stepping back, of not taking that which one does not need. What are other examples of passive actions that lead to positive results for another person, or for society more broadly (consider Lev. 23:3 for starters)? Have you ever been on the giving end of one of these types of actions, and if so, how did that feel for you? When have you been on the receiving end of someone else's act of not-taking, and what was that experience like?
 - *Create it:* This commentary suggests a contemporary equivalent of *pe'ah* to govern the space where our emotional energy and needs interact with those of the people around us. How would you visualize your own emotional field in the medium of your choice? What would it look like for someone to be able to take something that they need from what you offer in this space? How would it look for you to take something that you need from the emotional field of someone else?
- The *ger*, the stranger or foreigner, is identified in the laws of *pe'ah* and *leket* along with the poor person as a vulnerable member of society. Later in the parasha, we find another law pertaining to the *ger*: “You shall have one [legal] standard for *ger* and citizen alike: for I the Eternal am your God” (Lev. 24:22; see also 19:34). Why do you think it was necessary for this law to be instituted, especially with the weighty ending explicitly connecting it to God's authority? In what ways do you think this law

may have benefited the *gerim* in Israelite society, and when might it have created unintended issues? (A contemporary parallel that may aid in thinking through these questions is the 14th Amendment to the US Constitution.)

- *Create it:* Imagine the experience of the foreign-born *ger* in Israelite society, which is largely structured by tribe and clan affiliations. Using overlapping circles of something translucent or layerable (tissue paper, watercolor, lightly applied colored pencil, etc.), create a portrait of the similarities and differences, or places of inclusion and exclusion, between the *ger* and the Israelite in biblical society.
- The major sacred seasons and celebrations are outlined in Leviticus 23, beginning with Pesach (see p. 276), which was actually ordained much earlier, back in Egypt (see Exodus 12). The very first commandment to the Israelites as a group was actually not the first of the Ten Commandments, but to create a calendar, “This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you” (Ex. 12:2). Why would a shared, unique calendar and holidays be important to the formation of a nation or community? What values can a calendar convey, what story of a community can a calendar tell? What is the story created by the holidays listed in Leviticus 23?
 - *Create it:* What would a calendar specific to you, your family, or one of your communities look like? Which days would be marked as happy or solemn? For which observances and values would you create monuments in time? Illustrate a circular version of the year according to your calendar.

B'har-Bechukotai

[IMAGE: (Circle made of dark and light twists)]

"If you follow My laws and observe My commandments, I will grant you rains in their season so that the earth shall yield its produce and the trees of the field their fruit.... but if you do not obey Me and do not observe all these commandments...I will wreak misery upon you.... yet even then...I will not reject [you]." (Leviticus 26:3-4, 14-15, 45)

Commentary

The book of Leviticus goes out on a pretty harsh note. Parashat Bechukotai begins nicely, filled with promising visions of the prosperity that awaits the Israelites if they uphold their end of the covenant by keeping God's *mitzvot*, particularly the *mitzvah* of observing the *shemittah*, the agricultural sabbatical year. The blessings sound like Eden on earth: abundant harvests, fertility, security, peace, and God's own presence amongst them. But things take a turn for the terrifying as these blessings make way for curses, consequences for failing to keep the commandments which keep getting worse if the Israelites ignore the warning shots. As unpleasant as these curses are to read, there is some poetic symmetry to them. Each set of curses reverses the outcomes of the original blessings, to increasingly devastating effect: "I will grant your rains in their season, so that the earth shall yield its produce" (26:4) turns to "I will make your skies like iron and earth like copper so that your strength shall be spent to no purpose. Your land shall not yield its produce" (26:19-20), and so forth. Though the final curses especially are extreme, there is a sense of justice to these consequences since, after all, they are the other side of the same coin as the blessings.

Though we may no longer hold quite the same theology and sense of justice as our biblical forebearers did, viewing natural disasters and the like as divine retribution for poor human behavior, there are grains of truth to be found here. We know, for instance, that the increasingly disastrous consequences of climate change, including crop failures and famine, are directly connected to humanity's poor environmental stewardship and maltreatment of the land (the exact opposite of observing the *shemittah* years); the curses of this parasha still sound timely warnings and call for a change in behavior. We also know from our own experiences that—just as in this parasha—blessing and curse, triumph and tragedy, are

frequently intertwined, often two sides of the same coin. One of the tasks of being human is learning to hold bitter and sweet, sorrow and celebration together at the same time, and to know that this too is part of what it means to experience the Divine in the world. Sometimes there are blessings, and sometimes there are curses, but through it all, God, and our covenant, remain constant.

Reflections and Connections

- Before the blessings and curses of Bechukotai, B'har lays out the rules for the *shemita* (sabbatical) and *yovel* (jubilee) years in the land of Israel. Every seventh year, the people would give the land a *shabbat*, not working it and living only on what it produced naturally. Every fiftieth year, the land rests again; additionally, all debts are forgiven and land sold to another person goes back to its original owner. Read through Leviticus 25 and note your reactions to these laws; do they sound like a good idea, a bad idea, unrealistic? What conditions do you think would be necessary—both natural and societal—for the *shemita* and *yovel* years to work in practice? What might be said about what a society that successfully implements these *mitzvot* values most?
 - *Create it:* Imagine that a contemporary kind of *shemita* year was instituted in which no new material goods could be made or sold; how would your purchasing habits change if this was the sixth year of the cycle? Now imagine that it is the *shemita* year; choose an item of yours that is currently broken or in need of repair, and find a way to make it serviceable again.

- Holding blessing and curse, or joy and sorrow simultaneously is a common aspect of Jewish life and practice; consider, for instance, the ritual of shattering a glass at the end of a wedding ceremony. Where else in Jewish tradition do joy and sorrow intentionally commingle, and what is the rationale for this practice? When have you experienced joy and sorrow, or blessing and curse, at the same time in your own life? What was it like to have these two opposites at play at once?
 - *Create it:* In this parasha, the subjects of the blessings and the curses are the same, overlaid with a positive or negative filter. Choose another example of an idea, a medium, or something else that can be used to a positive or negative effect if one thing changes. Depict the positive and negative versions together in one design, emphasizing the difference that the one change makes.
- What do you think the Israelites thought of the God who lays out these blessings and curses as consequences for following their covenant? What do you think of this depiction of God? Do you agree with the assertion that blessing and curse, sorrow and joy are wrapped up in the human experience of the Divine in the world? Why or why not? If not, what would you propose as an alternative way to understand the theology of this parasha?
 - *Create it:* What does it look like to find the same Divinity in blessing and in curse, in good and in bad? Explore the intersections and divergences through sketches or sculpture in a single color and medium; what is the difference between positive and negative, where the Divine is and is not?

Numbers / *Bamidbar* / במדבר

<u>Bamidbar</u>	<u>151</u>
<u>Naso</u>	<u>155</u>
<u>B'haalot'cha</u>	<u>159</u>
<u>Sh'lach L'cha</u>	<u>163</u>
<u>Korach</u>	<u>167</u>
<u>Chukat</u>	<u>171</u>
<u>Balak</u>	<u>175</u>
<u>Pinchas</u>	<u>179</u>
<u>Matot-Masei</u>	<u>183</u>

Bamidbar

[IMAGE (Twelve buns, different sizes and different toppings)]

"In the second year following the exodus from Egypt, the Eternal spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai... saying, 'Take a census of the whole Israelite community by the clans of its ancestral houses, listing the names, every male, head by head.'" (Numbers 1:1-2)

Commentary

Reading the first chapters of Bamidbar (“in the wilderness”), the origin of this book’s English name, Numbers, is readily apparent. Two years after the Israelites have left Egypt, God commands a census, an accounting of “the whole Israelite community” (1:2), tribe by tribe. What quickly becomes clear, however, is that those who ‘count’ in these calculations is far from including everyone in the community.

The question of who ‘counts’ has been a recurring issue in Jewish spaces and in the wider world throughout the centuries and continues to reverberate today. We see that women are not included in any of the censuses in this parasha, which is consistent with the wider exclusion of the vast majority of women from the records of our ancient past, indicative of an editorial attitude that women’s stories and experiences did not count as significant or worth noting. Women still do not count in a *minyan*, a prayer quorum, in most present-day traditional Jewish communities. We see further evidence of social hierarchy and in these censuses as well— firstborn sons are important enough to be counted and recorded as individuals (3:43), Levites are an elite class— recorded by specific clans within their tribe—that is exempted from the battles in which common men will be conscripted to risk their lives (1:20, 49-50). Wealth, social status, power, and privilege have always altered the calculus of who counts, and how. Even within our Jewish communities, groups of people are marginalized, silenced, and excluded from leadership. In many American Ashkenazi spaces, BIJOC, Sephardim, Mizrachim, LGBTQ+ folks, differently-abled people, interfaith families, Jews by choice, and others may all be told, explicitly or implicitly, that they don’t ‘count’ in some regard, to the detriment of the entire community.

When we take stock of the amazing diversity of *Am Israel*, the Jewish People, from all around the world, we find that even before contemporary denominations and cultural and ethnic diversity, Jews have never all looked the same, or lived or practiced in just one way. We have always been a collection of distinct, but interconnected, tribes—made up of different sizes, with different flavors and textures, but all formed by and linked through a shared, nourishing, dough—and it is that diversity that makes us the resilient and richly complex community that we are today.

Reflections and Connections

- Compare an experience from when you have been in a space where a majority of your identities are represented as the norm to an experience from when this has not been the case, and a major aspect of your identity was rejected, excluded, or marginalized in a space. What were your feelings in each of these circumstances? Carefully consider the factors which led to your feeling included or excluded from the space; what did you see and hear that aroused or confirmed this understanding?
 - *Create it:* Recall your feelings from the experience in which you felt included, or part of the norm. What do these emotions or sensations look like to you? Design a space that could manifest these feelings for others using elements of color, furniture arrangement, images on the walls, etc.
- Look back on the current events of the past month or so; how many of these stories involve a conflict between whose voice or experience ‘counts,’ or matters, in a situation? Recall situations from the spaces to which you are connected—work, school, home, synagogue, etc.—where do you notice this type of conflict arising?

What could you, personally, do to lift up voices of those who are being silenced or marginalized?

- *Create it:* Visibility and representation are often modern equivalents of recorded names on a community census. Think of a community that you are deeply involved with; how would you visually represent that community and the proportions of different identities that you know of in that space? Try to think about both outward and inward presentation. How does the leadership look, how does the community as a whole look? After making your visual representation, see if you can determine who is missing from the picture. How would this community look from an outsider's perspective?
- How much do you know about Jewish communities other than the sort that you are part of now, or perhaps at another point in your life? Take some time each day this week to engage with people, stories, teachings, or other ways to learn about Jewish denominations, cultures, and experiences that differ from your own. Notice your internal reactions to each of these explorations. At the end of the week, take stock of what you have learned; how has it changed your understanding of what it means to be Jewish?
 - *Create it:* Research a Jewish food from a region or cultural tradition that you have never tried; learn its history and significance, and prepare it as authentically as you can. Alternatively, do something similar with another art form, a holiday observance, or a ritual practiced by a Jewish community other than your own. Afterwards, journal your reflections on this process, and what it opens up for you.

Naso

[IMAGE (Two hands in the priestly blessing gesture)]

"Speak to Aaron and his sons: thus shall you bless the people of Israel. Say to them, 'May the Eternal bless you and keep you. May the Eternal's countenance shine upon you and may God be gracious to you. May the Eternal's presence be with you always, and may God grant you peace.'" (Numbers 6:23-26)

Commentary

This threefold blessing, also known as the *Birkat Kohanim*, or the priestly benediction, is the most ancient and enduring blessing in Jewish tradition. The *kohanim* (descendants of the class of priests from within the Levite tribe) of some communities continue to bless the congregation with these words during services, usually covered by their *tallitot* and with their hands spread in the gesture illustrated by this challah, whence comes the other name for this ritual: *Nisiyat Kapayim*, or lifting of the hands. No longer limited to the *kohanim*, these words can be heard on Friday nights as families bless each other, at weddings and baby namings, or in any moment when we wish to lift someone up with the love and honor of a blessing.

The language of these blessings is particular to the Jewish people, but the wishes that they express speak to universal human needs. Distilled to their essences, the priestly blessings might be expressed more simply as: may you be safe; may you feel happy; may you find peace. Each line of the tripartite blessing gets progressively longer--the first line is three words in Hebrew, followed by five words in the second line and seven words in the third--and as the words increase, so does the complexity of the desires they address. Safety, knowing that we have food, shelter, protection, and health is the necessary foundation of our well-being; after these needs are met, we can wish for other blessings-- satisfaction in our work, material comforts, positive relationships. The highest blessing of all, that of peace, is a spiritual state of fulfillment and contentment, one not predicated upon attaining the blessings before it, but which makes the others all the sweeter.

So often, these blessings are offered joyous and happy occasions, but they are equally, if not more, suited to challenging moments as well. In times when speeches fail,

blessings can speak to the deepest needs and aspirations that we all share. Whether we reach out with our words or with our hands, these blessings are one of the most powerful gifts that we can give to others, and even to ourselves.

Reflections and Connections

- The second and third parts of the Priestly Benediction use idioms that refer to God's face (the Hebrew word "panav") as both illuminating and being lifted towards the person being blessed. Since even Moses does not get to see God's face (see Exodus 33:18-23, where, notably, "face" and "presence" are used somewhat interchangeably), how might we interpret these requests to experience God's countenance? Does the fact that God is the author of this blessing, according to the text, affect this interpretation?
 - *Create it:* Many of the Sages, especially Maimonides, were uncomfortable with anthropomorphic God language (that is, language which refers to God having a body, or even to doing anything human-like). How would you imagine the experience of having God's face shining upon you, without using any face-like imagery in your illustration or explanation?
- The Torah text does not specify a particular gesture or the use of hands in offering this blessing; however, the rabbinic commentators link the gesture of Aaron's blessing the people with raised hands in Leviticus 9:22 with the words of Priestly Blessing in Numbers 6:23-26 (see Rashi and Ibn Ezra on Lev. 9:22). Hands appear in moments of conferring blessings, authority, and oaths throughout the Torah; compare

moments that you find or recall. What makes hands particularly significant as vectors of blessing?

- *Create it:* What are some of the ways in which your own hands are able to transmit blessings, especially through what they can create? How might you create something on or for your hands that emphasizes these capacities?
- The practice of compassion meditation, which is rooted in Buddhist tradition, also makes use of the universal blessings within the *Birkat Kohanim*; phrases like, “may you be safe, may you feel happy, may you find peace” appear frequently in meditations for cultivating compassion for others, as well as for oneself. Try settling into a comfortable position, taking a few deep breaths, and calling to mind the face of a person you love. Say these phrases out loud, directing the blessings towards them in your heart. Do the same for a person whom you don’t know well, then for someone you don’t care for, and then for yourself. Which blessings feel easiest to give, and which feel the most challenging? Did you notice any shift within yourself as a result of this exercise? Try using the Hebrew, or the English translation of the *Birkat Kohanim* for the same meditation; does the specifically Jewish language change the way it feels to give these blessings?
 - *Create it:* Consider one of the people you blessed in your compassion meditation, and imagine what each of these blessings might look like for that person specifically: what might safety, happiness, and peace look like for them? Choose one of these, and make it into something physical; if you can, offer it to the person. How does this act of blessing feel, compared to the meditation?

B'haalot'cha

[IMAGE (Many little quails)]

"The riffraff in their midst felt a gluttonous craving, and then the Israelites wept and said, 'If only we had meat to eat!'... A wind from the Eternal started up, swept quail from the sea and strewed them all over the camp... the meat was still between their teeth when the anger of the Eternal blazed forth against the people and God struck the people with a very severe plague."
(Numbers 11:4,31,33)

Commentary

Imagine that you are driving a van full of young children on a week-long car trip. Every few miles, you hear one pipe up from the back, “I’m thirsty!” “I’m hungry!” “Are we there yet?” and each time, it sets off a chorus of “I’m hungry too!” “And me!” “And I need to pee!” even though they have a giant bag of snacks next to them and you already went to the rest stop ten minutes ago.

This is probably how Moses, and possibly also God, felt every single day from the moment the Israelites left Egypt.

It’s little wonder then that when the people--whose every need has been provided for since God freed them from slavery--start whining yet again, Moses and God lose it. Though they have been eating miraculous manna which, according to midrash (Ein Yaacov Yoma 8:2), tasted like whatever the eater wished, the Israelites complain, “If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish that we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. Now our gullets are shriveled. There is nothing at all! Nothing but this manna to look to!” (11:4-6). Moses throws up his hands and begs God for death rather than having to continue to carry the burden of this nation (14-15), and God responds by dumping acres of quail on the camp and then killing the ungrateful meat cravers. It’s not a proud moment for anyone.

Why is everyone so profoundly unhappy at this point in the fledgling nation’s narrative? In part, there is a deep conflict between the complaining Israelites, who want to return to the perceived comfort and familiarity of “the way things were before,” and their leaders, who are trying to move forward and create something new. While the Israelites grossly misremember the oppression and injustice they experienced in Egypt (which was not

that long ago!) as opulence and indulgence, their rosy nostalgia may be a manifestation of their understandable fear of the unknown. Instead of providing comfort, however, Moses and God incline towards punishment as they try to push the people towards their vision of how they ought to be, which only feeds the fear. Empathy and gratitude on both sides of the equation would have gone a long way in bringing these past- and future-oriented parties to find harmony in the present, so that they could have walked forward arm-in-arm.

Reflections and Connections

- When Moses expresses his frustration with the complaining Israelites, he cries out to God, “Did I produce all this people, did I give birth to them, that You should say to me, ‘Carry them in your bosom as a caretaker carries an infant?’” (11:11-12). His rhetorical metaphors, which use the language of pregnancy and birth, point towards God’s unique relationship with the Israelite people; an interesting and rare occurrence of maternal language used to refer to God in the Torah. Characterizing God as a provider of food also fits into a traditionally female role in the biblical context. How might the female caretaker metaphor for God that Moses uses here affect the way you interpret the rest of this story?
 - *Create it:* God is genderless in Jewish tradition, but different gendered metaphors are frequently used to express different facets of the Divine. Choose a gendered metaphor for God from the Torah (either this one, or another that you either like or dislike, such as “father” or “king”) and change the metaphor to fit another gender expression, visually or in writing. What new facet of the Divine does this exercise reveal to you?

- Overcoming the natural resistance of people and systems to change is the challenge of every kind of leader. What are the circumstances and practices that have you found to help most in creating change? If you were Moses in this story, how would you have applied those insights? How might the story have turned out differently?
 - *Create it:* How would you visually map the process of change, without using words? Try this with a specific example first, then see if you can generalize the process.
- The Israelites are not the only people who have misremembered the past as far rosier than it was, either for themselves or for others. Consider different points in history which are, or have been, recast in an overly simplified or positive light; when, and for whom, does this provide comfort, and how does it create pain? How have these memories been used in service of creating or rejecting something new?
 - *Create it:* Using a historical or personal example of an idealized event from the past, create a scene that captures the rosy version of that memory, using only one color. Then, using a contrasting color, add in the less happy or positive elements that this version leaves out, as if seen through the eyes of someone who would not remember this memory as a source of pain. What does the balance of the two colors on the page expose?

Sh'lach L'cha



[IMAGE (Giant cluster of grapes, with astonished person for scale)]

Parashat Sh'lach: “[The scouts] reached the wadi Eshkol, and there they cut down a branch with a single cluster of grapes— it had to be borne on a carrying frame by two of them—and some pomegranates and figs.” (Numbers 13:23)

Commentary

The twelve scouts that Moses sent to survey the Israelites' destination, the land of Canaan, bring back glowing descriptions of the land and its epically large produce. However, ten of the twelve also spread fearful reports of its gigantic, intimidating inhabitants, "The land we scouted is one that devours its inhabitants; all the peoples that we saw in it were of great size...we looked like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and so we must have been to them!" (13:32-33). Though Caleb and Joshua, the other two scouts, offer a much more optimistic and pious assessment, the rest of the camp descends into a panic and abandons all hope. God punishes the Israelites for their lack of faith by forbidding the entire generation from entering the Promised Land, with the exception of Caleb and Joshua, who maintained their faith in the face of intimidation.

When we are feeling anxious or overwhelmed, the scope of our challenges can sometimes feel insurmountably large. Occasionally, we need a reminder to take a step back and see things in perspective; is the problem itself really so big, or is that how our emotions are seeing it? But sometimes, our sense of perspective is accurate; some problems really are gigantic, so much so that we may not even be able to see the full scope of the challenge. In such cases, we might feel too small to take on these huge, systemic, even global issues, and end up losing faith in the possibility of moving towards solutions.

The scared scouts may not have been exaggerating the size of the Anakites, but when they said, "we looked like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and so we must have been to them," the order of those clauses reveals a critical error. How the Anakites saw them was immaterial, for they had already reduced how they viewed themselves from their own perspective, thus ensuring their own defeat. But Caleb and Joshua saw things differently;

they understood that faith and hope can empower individuals to embrace their own agency and to work with others in service of a goal that is bigger than all of them, even one that may extend multiple lifetimes. Because they could see themselves not as small individuals, but as part of a whole greater than the sum of its parts, Caleb and Joshua ultimately led the way to the victory they envisioned.

Reflections and Connections:

- The Israelites experience many crises of faith--often with disastrous consequences--throughout the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. Why is it this episode in particular that results in God prohibiting an entire generation from entering the Promised Land?
 - *Create it:* Think of a time when, in the midst of an uncertainty or difficulty, negative emotions distorted your perspective on the situation at hand. How did the future look through that distortion? What visual metaphor would you use to capture the effect that these emotions had on your perspective?
- What are some gigantic challenges that you face or see in the world that feel too overwhelming to tackle? Make a list of aspects of one of those challenges that are actually beyond the scope of your ability to solve, and then make a list of everything that you could contribute towards a solution, no matter how small. How do you feel after creating the second list?
 - *Create it:* Envision what it would look like to achieve a solution to one of these problems. Illustrate or describe that outcome in detail, and then examine

how you feel when you contemplate that visionary endpoint. Turn that feeling into a piece of art that inspires you to work towards your vision.

- In the ritual of *hafrashat challah*, separating out the *challah*, which originates in this parasha (see p. 317), the small piece that is removed from the dough is what sanctifies the whole batch. What connections do you find between this ritual and the narrative of the twelve scouts?
 - *Create it:* Free draw, write, or sculpt for however long you'd like; then, take a pair of scissors to your work and remove whichever part will make the composition better as a whole.

Korach



[IMAGE (Flowering almond branch)]

“The chieftains gave [Moses] a staff for each chieftain of an ancestral house, twelve staffs in all; among these staffs was that of Aaron. Moses deposited the staffs before the Eternal, in the Tent of the Pact. The next day, Moses entered the Tent of the Pact, and there the staff of Aaron of the house of Levi had sprouted: it had brought forth sprouts, produced blossoms, and borne almonds.” (Numbers 17:21-23)

Commentary

Against the visceral drama of Korach, Datan, and Aviram's rebellion against Moses and Aaron's leadership-- which God quells by opening the ground to swallow up the instigators along with their families, then consuming their followers with divine fire, and then sending a plague against the remaining Israelites who wondered if maybe the rebellion's leaders might have had a point-- it is easy to miss the quiet confirmation of Aaron's right to leadership that follows. It is no less miraculous that Aaron's otherwise ordinary staff sprouts leaves, flowers, and almonds overnight than that the earth opens up and swallows people--indeed, both appear in the list of the rabbis' list of the ten miracles created in the twilight of the sixth day of Creation (Pirkei Avot 5:6, see also Chizkuni on Num. 17:23)--but naturally, the divine intervention that involves sudden death and mass panic is likely to be more memorable.

Though God appointed Aaron to speak for his brother Moses to Pharaoh and to the Israelites back in Exodus 4:14-16, once they crossed the sea, Aaron's voice faded into the background as Moses took to his leadership role more readily. Aaron often appears by Moses' side in front of the community, but rarely speaks, and most of his duties as High Priest are reported in the third person, with Aaron quietly carrying out the long daily schedule of sacrificial worship on the entire community's behalf. Since Moses gets most of the airtime and the credit for leading the Israelites, Aaron is easy to overlook and underestimate; however, to do so would be to miss a model of dedicated leadership that focuses on service to something greater than the self and to a legacy that will last for many generations to follow.

The subtle, peaceful confirmation of Aaron's model of leadership teaches that a person doesn't need to have the loudest voice, or the most fiery persona, or the most dazzling ideas to be an effective leader. It also reminds us to look for differences, and to make an effort to seek out and validate the leadership and contributions of those who are often drowned out or overlooked. In doing so, we help to ensure that everyone has a seat at the table, from which fresh ideas can blossom and new possibilities will take root.

Reflections and Connections

- In their commentaries on Numbers 17:23, the rabbis offer different interpretive explanations for why Aaron's staff produced almonds in particular. Rashi observes that almonds are the first fruit to blossom in the spring, and connects this quality to the speed with which one who challenges the priesthood would be punished. Ibn Ezra looks to the root of the word *shekeidim*, almonds, which is the same as the root for *shoked*, to work diligently or eagerly, and sees the almonds as symbolic of Aaron's dedication to his work. Which of these interpretations do you find more compelling, and why? Starting with either of these qualities, or drawing on your own associations with almonds, what other interpretations might you propose?
 - *Create it:* Using slivered almonds--which also resemble the petals of almond blossoms-- or another natural material, create a representation of the quality of Aaron's leadership that you find most important or admirable.
- Reflect on the Aaron-like people you know or know of; what are some of the qualities that make them unique, and how do they use those qualities to lead and serve others?

How might you lift up some of these traits in your own domains of leadership and service?

- *Create it:* If the blossoming almond tree is a metaphor for Aaron’s leadership, what nature-based visual metaphor would you use for one or more of these qualities, and how would you draw the connection?
- Later in Tanakh, the prophet Elijah will experience God’s presence, “the Eternal passed by [Elijah]. There was a great and mighty wind, splitting mountains and shattering rocks by the power of the Eternal; but God was not in the wind. After the wind—an earthquake; but God was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake—fire; but the Eternal was not in the fire. And after the fire—a still, small voice” (1 Kings 19:11-12). What connections do you notice between this passage and Parashat Korach? What new understandings might you derive about each of these texts based upon the parallels between them?
 - *Create it:* How do you imagine the *kol dimamah dakah*, the still, small voice of God, might sound? Experiment with making different kinds of soft sounds-- dripping water on different surfaces, rubbing different fabrics together--or listening for sounds in very quiet spaces. Which sounds come the closest to the voice you imagined?

Chukat



[IMAGE (Rock with water spilling out)]

Parashat Chukat: “Moses and Aaron assembled the congregation in front of the rock; and he said to them, ‘Listen, you rebels, shall we get water for you out of this rock?’ And Moses raised his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod. Out came copious water, and the community and their beasts drank.” (Numbers 20:10-11)

Commentary

Moses is often regarded as a man without fault; with the exception, that is, of his temper. At this point in the story, Moses has just lost his sister Miriam (20:1), and the people are whining and challenging Moses and Aaron's leadership yet again because they have nothing to drink. So perhaps it is not surprising that when God commands Moses to speak to a rock to produce water, Moses speaks harshly to the Israelites and strikes the rock instead. Though the people's thirst is quenched, Moses and Aaron are punished with the decree that they may not enter the Promised Land, for they failed to sanctify God in the eyes of the Israelites (20:12).

The rabbis argue with each other in their columns of commentary over why exactly Moses and Aaron were punished so severely in this episode. Among them, Maimonides insists that Moses' wrongdoing in this situation was having lost the composure he should have maintained as a God-ordained leader and prophet, thus setting a bad example and falsely implying to the people that God was angry with them as well. Nachmanides, on the other hand, notes that Moses gets angry at the Israelites quite often (so does God, for that matter!), and only this time did it result in punishment, so that cannot be the real problem in this case. Though many follow Maimonides and read this parasha as an interdiction against acting in anger, Nachmanides' observation allows us to read this emotion in a more nuanced and less vilified manner.

Of course, it is best not to let anger get the better of us, and we certainly should never allow our anger to boil over into violence. But surprisingly often, when expressed appropriately, anger is a constructive emotion. Anger is an important indicator of deeper issues within relationships, communities, or organizations that need to be addressed, and

when we are on the receiving end of the anger, it can reveal behaviors or attitudes of our own that may need amendment. Directed towards problem solving, anger is a powerful motivating force that can turn apathy into action. It is anger that keeps us from going numb and turning away helplessly when confronted with injustices of every scale; it is anger that leads to change.

Reflections and Connections

- Read through Numbers 20:1-13, focusing on expressions of anger and places where anger may be silently present. Is the anger constructive or destructive in each of these appearances? What underlying issues, either within this episode or from previous chapters, does the anger serve to illuminate? How might these issues have been addressed such that the story could have turned out differently?
 - *Create it:* How do you imagine Moses' internal state in the moment at which he strikes the rock? Create an abstract image that captures the balance of his emotions in this episode.
- When have you experienced anger that has led to positive outcomes? What were some of the other factors that made this anger constructive, rather than destructive?
 - *Create it:* Fire, along with its associated colors and effects, is a common visual metaphor for anger (a biblical idiom for expressing anger is *yichar af*, a hot/ burning nose!). Since much of the anger of this story revolves around water, how could you create and use the visual language of water as a metaphor for anger instead? How does this different imagery affect your understanding of the emotion?

- Miriam dies in the first verse of Numbers 20, and the community's lack of water is announced immediately thereafter. From this juxtaposition, the rabbis derive a beautiful midrash that an ever-flowing well accompanied the Israelites on their wanderings through the wilderness due to Miriam's merit, and disappeared upon her death (Bamidbar Rabbah 1:2). Considering the significant events in Miriam's story (at least as much of it as the Torah and midrashim recount), what makes the well of water an appropriate symbol for Miriam's leadership?
 - *Create it:* Contemporary Pesach seders now often feature the addition of Miriam's Cup (*kos Miryam*) as a ritual item in recognition of Miriam's leadership and her critical role in the Exodus story. Design your own Miriam's Cup for use in a Pesach Seder, havdalah, or an Ushpizot ceremony for Sukkot (which is where the Miriam's Cup first appeared). What features of Miriam's story and character would you highlight in your design, and why?

Balak

[IMAGE (Hamsa with an eye in the center)]

Parashat Balak: “Word of Bilam son of Beor, word of the man whose eye is true, word of him who hears God’s speech, who beholds visions from the Almighty, prostrate, but with eyes uncovered: How good are your tents, O Jacob, your dwellings, O Israel!” (Numbers 24:3-5)

Commentary

And suddenly, after recounting the Israelites' victory against the Amorites, the spotlight swings away from the narrative of the nation we have been immersed in since the Exodus and lands on Balak, king of the neighboring enemy Moabites. Through Balak's outside eyes, we get our first real glimpse of how the Israelites appear to other nations; apparently, they're an intimidating sight. Afraid that the numerous new neighbors who "cover the eye of the earth" (22:5) will swallow up everything around him, Balak sends for the prophet Bilaam, who--surprise!--happens to be a legitimate non-Israelite prophet of God, "who beholds visions from the Almighty...with eyes uncovered" (24:4). Bilaam is hired to curse the Israelites, but because he is a true prophet and can only speak what God puts in his mouth, Bilaam can only pronounce blessings over the people, much to Balak's dismay. (Oh, and Bilaam's donkey talks, but this doesn't seem to bother anyone.)

Words that recur throughout a section of text (called leitwords) alert us to its key themes. In this parasha, words related to sight--vision, eyes, seeing-- appear often, and Balak's unusual idiom for the Israelites' vast numbers, "cover the eye of the earth," in contrast with God "uncover[ing] Bilaam's eyes" (22:31), invites us to consider who sees clearly in this parasha, and what that vision reveals. In this unusual parasha, Bilaam is granted the privilege of having the truest sight and fullest perspective, and the Israelites, ironically, have the most limited view. From their encampment, the Israelites cannot see Balak's fear-driven attempts to curse them from the altars in the mountains above, and cannot hear God's powerful protective blessing delivered through Bilaam.

Including this account, told from an outside perspective, in our nation-building story suggests that we only see and understand ourselves fully when we can step outside of our

own narratives and view ourselves through the eyes of our enemies and our (sometimes unlikely) friends: perspectives that may uncover our eyes to truths and blessings we might not expect.

Reflections and Connections

- Read through Parashat Balak carefully, noting each time you come across words that relate to seeing and uncovering. What patterns do you notice? How does sight function symbolically in this story?
 - *Create it:* There are interesting similarities between this story and when the first humans eat from the Tree of Knowledge in Genesis 3: the only two instances of talking animals in the Hebrew Bible, eyes that are opened (Gen. 3) or uncovered (Num. 22-24), angels, blessings, curses, different forms of knowledge, and more. Compare these two stories and create your own midrash (interpretation) that uses one or more of these similarities to uncover something new about both stories.
- One of the blessings Bilaam utters, “How good are your tents, O Jacob, your dwellings, O Israel!” (24:5), was later incorporated into the *siddur* (prayerbook) as the first line of the prayer Mah Tov, traditionally recited upon entering a synagogue. What does the biblical context of this curse-turned-blessing contribute to this particular liturgical moment? Does it affect the meaning of this prayer for you? Why or why not?
 - *Create it:* If you were to illustrate the Mah Tov page of the *siddur*, how would you choose to visually interpret this verse? In what ways might you

incorporate the biblical context with contemporary parallel? How would this image serve to prepare the viewer for prayer?

- This parasha's challah design features an eye (covered or uncovered, depending on your perspective) in the center of a hamsa, which is a protective symbol from the ancient Middle East that is still popular in many faith traditions today, including Judaism. Jewish tradition has long been conflicted on the use of protective amulets, which might violate the prohibition against magic and divination (see Leviticus 19:26), but which even the rabbis of the Talmud regarded as an occasionally effective and certainly a commonplace practice (B. Shabbat 53a). How do you react to Jewish imagery or words used in amulets or other magical practices, and why do you think you react in this way?
 - *Create it:* Design your own physical object that reminds you of a blessing you experience, or one that gives you a feeling of protection. What colors, images, words, materials, textures would inspire the feeling or memory you intend?

Pinchas



[IMAGE: Gavel with shattered shards]

“The daughters of Tzelophechad... Machla, Noah, Chogla, Milca, and Tirtza...stood before Moses, Eleazar the priest, the chieftains, and the whole assembly...and they said...‘Let not our father’s name be lost to his clan just because he had no son! Give us a holding among our father’s kinsmen!’ Moses brought their case before the Eternal, and the Eternal said to Moses, ‘The plea of Tzelophechad’s daughters is just...transfer their father’s share to them.’”
(Numbers 27: 1-7)

Commentary

Tucked away in a parasha with lots of census-taking and land-apportioning and sacrifices for festivals, we find a rare and shining gem of biblical patriarchy-smashing from the Daughters of Tzelophechad: Machla, Noah, Chogla, Milca, and Tirtza. As the various tribes and clans of Israelites are enumerated for the purpose of assigning hereditary land plots when they cross the Jordan River, these five women see a problem.

Since these clan-based plots will be inherited only through the male line, which was so much the norm at that point that it did not even merit mention in the distribution instructions, and because their father had no sons, their family's land allotment would be swallowed up by another clan in their tribe. So they marched up to the top leadership, in front of the entire Israelite community, and demanded the right to inherit their father's portion of land, a right that a son would have been granted automatically. Surprisingly, God sides with the women, and the laws of land inheritance are changed. Though daughters were not granted equal rights to inherit in most cases, making women the first to inherit if a man had no sons, as opposed to favoring the closest male relative, was a major step for the time.

The Daughters of Tzelophechad are not only brave, but smart as well; they work within the system to bring about incremental--but no less radical--change. Women were only a few steps above household property in biblical times, so the idea that they could inherit tribal land might have seemed preposterous to the men in charge. However, by presenting their case in a way that appeared to support the patriarchal system--perpetuating their father's name--the women were able to make the powers that be listen and apprehend the justice of their case, and thus set precedent for future progress towards equality.

There are so many more glass ceilings to shatter, not only by women, but by historically undervalued and oppressed people of all kinds, and important progress in bringing about justice and equality will come from both dismantling unjust systems as well as from working within them to bring about change.

Reflections and Connections

- The story of the Daughters of Tzelophechad does not end here. The sequel picks up in Numbers 36, in which the (male) heads of their tribe's clans appeal to Moses to add a stipulation to the daughters' right to inherit tribal allotments, requiring that women who inherit marry men within their tribe, so that the land does not pass to another tribe (because men would acquire their wife's property through marriage). God agrees, and the Daughters of Tzelophechad comply. In what ways does this second half of the story change your understanding of the first half, if at all? What do you think motivated the heads of these clans to petition for this change? How do you understand the Daughters' response?
 - *Create it:* Re-narrate or illustrate both parts of this story as if they were told from the perspective of Machla, Noah, Chogla, Milca, or Tirtza-- or, perhaps, from the perspective of one of their daughters. What are the key differences between your retelling and the biblical narrative?
- Long ago, on the holiday of Tu b'Av (see Rosh Chodesh Av, p 300), the young women of Israel who were not married would go out into the fields and vineyards in borrowed white clothing (so that no one knew their socio-economic status), and the unmarried young men would go out to meet them and seek out a marriage partner. On

this day, the Talmud notes, the restriction on women marrying outside of their tribes from Numbers 36 was lifted, and no longer applied to the second generation and onward in the land of Israel (BT Bava Batra 121a). The rabbis of the Talmud connect this holiday to Yom Kippur; what similarities can you draw between these two occasions? How does this tradition affect your reading of the Daughters of Tzelophechad narrative?

- *Create it:* How would you capture the idea of ongoing, incremental change in a single image? Is it more effective to focus on the starting point, the ending or present point, something in the middle, the sense of movement, or something else entirely?

Matot-Masei



[IMAGE (Flat tablet, emerging swirls in bottom corner)]

“These were the marches of the Israelites who started out from the land of Egypt, troop by troop, in the charge of Moses and Aaron. Moses recorded the starting points of their various marches as directed by the Eternal. Their marches, by starting points, were as follows....They set out from Pene-hahiroth and passed through the sea into the wilderness; and they made a three-days’ journey in the wilderness of Etham and encamped at Marah....”
(Numbers 33:1-8)

Commentary

The book of Bamidbar began with a speech “in the wilderness (*bamidbar*)” (Num. 1:1) the location which gives the book its Hebrew name, and in its final chapters, Moses recounts the Israelites’ forty-year-long journey in that setting, marking each step along the way from Egypt (33:1) to the edge of the Jordan River, just opposite their final destination (33:50). The distance should not have taken so long to cover, but God intentionally “made Israel wander in the wilderness forty years” until the generation that went out from Egypt was gone (32:13). This wandering period was a punishment, but it was also an incredibly important, even generative time for the community as a whole.

This liminal period between Egypt and the Promised Land is often seen as an empty sort of time, and the phrase “wandering in the wilderness” implies wasted time in a wasteland space; however, a review of that journey in hindsight reveals that this wilderness was not so empty after all. The wilderness is the space in which the Israelites received Torah, survived on miraculous sustenance from God, and where they learned (sometimes, the hard way) how to live together as they began to build a new kind of society under a new set of rules. This expansive wilderness was a fertile space for process— for experimentation, failure, and revision— an open and free space, a container for the building blocks of creation. Like a blank sheet of paper, the wilderness is a place in which ideas can be worked out and new and creative forms can emerge; a place where perhaps, if you sit and stare at it long enough, you might even receive revelation.

As with many journeys, when we are in the midst of a long process, it can be difficult to see just how far we have travelled. Taking the time and making the space to step back and reflect on how much progress we have made— what we have tried, what we have learned,

how we have redirected and where we have succeeded— can inspire us to keep moving forward, especially when we know that we still have a long way to go. Even space that feels empty, be it a wilderness, a pause, or a blank page, is filled with possibilities and room for growth.

Reflections and Connections

- This challah for Matot-Masei began an exploration of generative blank space. I rolled out a blank “page” for the wilderness, and without any intention to create a particular image, I let my hands and the dough start to lead me somewhere. Eventually, this design emerged; as it turns out, it looks quite a bit like the absentminded doodles I make in the corners of my notebooks. When it came out of the oven, I was delighted that the materials within that doughy wilderness completed the design for me; an air bubble produced by over-excited yeast created an abstract Mount Sinai in the upper corner, and the resilient glutens in the rectangle of dough that I had rolled out pulled the corners dough back, creating the shape of a tablet. I found that the wilderness already contained the ingredients for revelation; all it needed was my openness to helping it take shape.
 - *Create it:* Try this for yourself: take a blank piece of paper and a writing or drawing utensil, sit somewhere comfortable and quiet, and set a timer for twenty minutes. The only rules for this time are that you must make marks on the page, and you must continue for the whole twenty minutes. When the time is up, examine your page without judgment. What do you notice about what has emerged from that open space?

- What are the words, feelings, and images that you associate with “wilderness?” Why do you think Torah was given in the wilderness? What might we learn from this?
 - *Create it:* Recall a time when you experienced a moment of revelation, or learned or created something radically new for you. Try to visualize that moment as best you can-- what was around you at the time? What could you hear? see? smell? feel? What can you connect from those surroundings to the revelation you had in that moment? What can you create that captures the essence of that connection?
- When has your life taken an unexpected twist, or has a particular path turned out to be more winding than expected? How did it feel when you were in the midst of that journey, and what are your emotions when you look back on it in retrospect? If you could go back and visit yourself at that midpoint, what would you say, based on your current perspective?
 - *Create it:* What would a map of your life’s journey so far look like? Without using words, how would you represent the formative moments, the paths between them, the challenges and the choices? After creating the map of your journey so far, step back and reflect on the whole creation. Then, based only on the shape in front of you, add a projection of where the map might lead next.

Deuteronomy / *Devarim* / דְּבָרִים

<u>Devarim</u>	<u>188</u>
<u>Vaetchannan</u>	<u>192</u>
<u>Eikey</u>	<u>196</u>
<u>Re'eh</u>	<u>200</u>
<u>Shoftim</u>	<u>204</u>
<u>Ki Teitzei</u>	<u>208</u>
<u>Ki Tavo</u>	<u>211</u>
<u>Nitzavim</u>	<u>215</u>
<u>Vayeilech</u>	<u>219</u>
<u>Ha'azinu</u>	<u>223</u>

Devarim

[IMAGE (A scroll and quill)]

“These are the words that Moses spoke to all of Israel... On the other side of the Jordan, in the land of Moab, Moses undertook to expound this teaching [*torah*].” (Deuteronomy 1:1, 5)

Commentary

Set on the opposite shore of the Jordan from the Promised Land, only an eleven days' walk from Sinai, the final book of Torah, *Devarim* (words), introduces itself as a (very long) speech directly from Moses to his people, explaining the previous three books' worth of commandments in his last opportunity to set the Israelites on the right path before they enter the Land without him. Indeed, much of the book that follows this introduction seems rather repetitive, with Moses reiterating many of the events and commandments from the Exodus onward; however, the retelling in Deuteronomy is not always consistent with how the story or law was told the first time around.

“These are the words that Moses spoke to all of Israel” (1:1)--the first words of this book and parasha indicate what makes *Devarim* so special. Not only is this Moses' opportunity to tell the story of the last 40 years of his life and leadership from his own perspective, but also, this is the first book in the Jewish canon that explicitly presents the *mitzvot* from a human perspective. The dutiful reporter and recorder of God's word finally gets a chance to speak on his own behalf, and in the process, the first law-giver becomes the law's first interpreter: “Moses undertook to expound this teaching” (1:5). The Torah is not even finished yet, but the practice of explaining its laws and re-reading its narratives from different perspectives, which will become the center of Jewish intellectual creativity for millenia to follow, is already underway.

The differences between Moses' accounts and the initial renditions need not be seen as conflicting, with one account being true and the other false. Every individual story that we hear comes from a certain perspective, and can only convey part of the greater narrative surrounding an experience or idea. The more perspectives and accounts we collect, the more

detailed and three-dimensional the narrative becomes. Stitching these stories together into a cohesive whole requires empathy and openness to the truths that each perspective can offer, even—especially—when they conflict with our own versions; though this can be challenging, the reward is a fuller and richer understanding of the histories, memories, values and traditions that inform who we are.

Reflections and Connections

- Compare the two versions of one of the episodes Moses recalls in this parasha, either delegating leadership and choosing judges (Deut. 1:9-18, Ex. 18:13-27) or sending scouts to the land (Deut. 1:20-45, Num. 13-14; see also Num. 20:2-12). Pay attention to both the facts of the stories and the manner in which they are told. What are the similarities between the two accounts, and what are the differences? What might the differences indicate about the values, perspectives, and motivations of each story teller?
 - *Create it:* Using two different colors, textures, or materials, superimpose one version of one of these stories (either the whole episode, or one facet of the story) atop the other, utilizing whatever means of visual storytelling you like. What do you gather from the points of overlap, and the points of divergence? What is the overall effect of the combination?
- The generation of Israelites that Moses addresses in this book-length speech are notably not the same generation that experienced the Exodus or the Revelation at Sinai; they will only hear Moses' versions of the events and Moses' elucidation of God's laws, rather than experiencing them directly. What effects might this have had

on this generation's relationship to Moses, to God, to the commandments? How might this effect extend, or not, to future generations, and why does it matter?

- *Create it:* The book of *Pirkei Avot* in the Mishnah opens by establishing a chain of transmission eventually leading to the Rabbis, "Moses received the Torah at Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua, Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the prophets, and the prophets to the men of the Great Assembly" (1:1). This version leaves out all of the Israelites of the two generations that Moses led besides Joshua, among others. Illustrate a new chain of transmission that imagines how Torah was passed down and interpreted from Sinai by anyone *but* the figures in the *Pirkei Avot* passage.
- When have you encountered a narrative that was significantly different from or even contradictory to your own memory or previous understanding of an event? What was your first reaction upon hearing the other narrative? Did this initial reaction change over time, and if so, what do you think caused this shift?
 - *Create it:* Based on your memory or knowledge of the event in question, as well as the additional perspectives that you have heard or can imagine, create a single composition that encompasses as many versions of a key point in the story as you can, perhaps in a Cubist or Narrative art style.

Vaetchanan

[IMAGE (Scribal letter *shin*)]

“Hear O Israel, the Eternal is our God, the Eternal is one! And you shall love the Eternal your God with all your heart, with all your being, and with all of your muchness.” (Deuteronomy 6:4-5)

Commentary

Vaetchanan is a packed parasha, featuring Moses' recollection of the Revelation at Sinai, including his repetition of the Ten Commandments (with a few emendations). As Moses adjures the Israelites to heed the many additional commandments that he will teach over the course of Deuteronomy, the words he recites in his enthusiasm later become part of the *Shema/V'ahavta*, one of the central prayers in Jewish liturgy. As per the instructions in this parasha, these words are traditionally recited every morning and evening, and inscribed on parchment that is affixed to arms and foreheads using *tefillin*, and to doorposts via *mezzuzot*.

The word *Shema*, a command meaning listen, pay attention, or obey, begins with the letter shin (ש), the three branches of which correspond to the threefold commandment to love God with all of our heart (the *lev* the seat of reason, in biblical thought), all of our being (the *nefesh* is a self, a life-breath, a soul), and all of our “much-ness” (the adjective *me-od*, which means many or very, is used as a noun here). Clearly, this instruction is no small matter--so few *mitzvot* explicitly require this sort of mental and emotional investment--but it is a curious one. Even in the Ten Commandments, we are not commanded to love our parents; how could we be required to love God in the first place, let alone with heart, being, and muchness combined?

Perhaps it helps to know that In the Hebrew Bible, love is generally less romantic and familial, and more about commitment and responsibility. This understanding of love as commitment might also aid in interpreting the word *me-od*, the ambiguous “muchness” with which we are commanded to love God. *Me-odecha* could be that special something that you bring to the projects and causes and ideas and people who inspire you to do more than you

ever thought possible, or that which pulls you towards purposes and principles that are greater than yourself, connecting you to the bigger picture. Or maybe, it is the inner spark that makes each one of us unique, enabling us to love God in a way that no one else can. Bringing our fullest selves and efforts, whatever they may look like, to our commitments and responsibilities as Jews is a beautiful way to fulfill this *mitzvah*.

Reflections and Connections

- The *Shema* instructs us to turn its words and abstract concepts into physical ritual objects, such as *mezuzah*, *tallit*, and *tefillin*. What other physical objects represent abstract concepts? Do you think the abstract becomes more or less powerful when it is made into something concrete? Why or why not?
 - *Create it*: Choose an abstract idea or a particular set of words that are meaningful to you (a prayer, song lyrics, a passage from a book, etc.). How can you turn this abstract idea into something concrete?
- Judaism is often said to be more about deed than creed, and that the *Shema* is the closest thing Jews have to a unified statement of belief. Do you agree with this assessment? If you were to choose another passage or idea from Jewish tradition as your declaration of core principles, what would it be, and why?
 - *Create it*: Which symbol from Jewish tradition would you choose as the most iconic statement of Jewish belief? Or, what new symbol might you create to fulfill this purpose?
- How would you interpret *me-od*, translated here as “muchness?” What do you love with all of your muchness? How does that love manifest itself?

- *Create it:* Without using the word ‘love’ or its commonly associated symbols, like a heart, how would you convey the love on which you reflected above?

Eikev



[IMAGE (Braid with wheat stalks and raindrops)]

“God subjected you to hunger and then gave you manna to eat...in order to teach you that humans do not live on bread alone, but that humans may live on anything that comes forth from the Eternal’s mouth” (Deuteronomy 8:3)

“If you obey the commandments that I enjoin upon you this day, loving the Eternal your God and serving God with all your heart and soul, I will grant the rain for your land in season, the early rain and the late. You shall gather in your new grain and wine and oil.” (Deuteronomy 11:13-14)

Commentary

From the moment that human beings left the Garden of Eden all the way back in Parashat B'reisheet, food production has been a somewhat contentious partnership endeavor, requiring a combination of human labor and the cooperation of the earth's natural resources. "By the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread," God tells the first humans in Genesis 3:19, and indeed, in order to eat bread, which was the staple food of the ancient diet, considerable sweaty effort was necessary. Grain had to be planted, tended, harvested, threshed, winnowed, ground (the flour needed to feed one household for one day required about five hours of grinding), mixed with water, and cooked in order to be eaten. Breads required the additional steps of kneading, rising, and shaping before baking. Ultimately though, most of this substantial human effort would not be possible without nature's consent; if the rains did not arrive in the right quantities and intervals, the crops could fail.

Unlike the manna that God provided in the wilderness, which required minimal physical labor on the human end, producing bread in the Israelites' new land would necessitate effort. God does promise to relieve at least some of that post-Eden burden by ensuring nature's cooperation-- only on the condition, however, that they follow the commandments. In this way, Torah becomes a means through which God can continue to provide sustenance to the people, but in a way which involves their intention and input as well.

Today, we might understand Torah as a source of spiritual sustenance, providing bountiful harvests of wisdom and food for thought when we put in the work of engaging with its words, a medium for greater purpose and connection reminding us that we do not live on bread alone, that our lives are about more than fulfilling basic functions. Torah is a means

through which we can continue to partner with God in creating a world that feels more like Eden; perhaps God will create the conditions, but it is our job to do the grinding work of ensuring that everyone has access to the sustenance and nourishment they need to rise to their fullest potential.

Reflections and Connections

- Aside from actual food, what are some of the most important sources of sustenance and nourishment for human beings? How does one access these resources? What are some of the ways in which you nourish others and enable them to thrive, and how might you expand your reach?
 - *Create it:* Choose one of the metaphysical sources of sustenance that is most important in your life. How many elements, such as people and circumstances, can you identify that enable you to be nourished by that source? How would you diagram the connections between these elements and you?
- Elsewhere in this *parasha*, we find the source text for the *Birkat HaMazon*, the blessing after meals, “When you have eaten your fill, give thanks to the Eternal your God for the good land that God has given you” (Deuteronomy 8:10). Look up the text of this multi-part blessing; what are the different sources of sustenance and nourishment, broadly understood, that are attributed to God’s benevolence in this prayer? Which of these praises and requests are exclusive to God, and which require human partnership?
 - *Create it:* *Birkat HaMazon* begins with the theme of food and ends on the subjects of redemption and peace. How would you exemplify the concepts of

redemption or peace in a flavor, a dish, or a banquet?

- The blessing recited before eating bread, *HaMotzi*, is derived from verses Psalm 104 that echo the ideas of Deuteronomy 11, “You make the grass grow for the cattle, and herbage for a person’s labor that they may get food out of the earth (*l’hotzi lechem min ha’aretz*)/ Wine that cheers a person’s heart, oil that makes the face shine, and bread that sustains a person’s soul” (Psalm 104:14-15). The text of *HaMotzi*, however, removes the human’s role entirely, “Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the Universe, Who brings forth bread from the earth.” How does this change in attribution affect the blessing’s meaning?
 - *Create it*: Make a challah or another loaf of bread, consciously connecting and attributing each ingredient and step of the process to factors that are outside of your control (for instance, thinking about the path the egg you crack into the bowl took to get from the chicken to your hand, focusing on the chemistry happening in the dough as you knead). Before you break into the loaf, recite the text of *HaMotzi*. How has your intention throughout the process affected how it felt to say this blessing? Alternatively, write a new blessing that highlights the Divine-human partnership that resulted in the bread you are about to eat.

Re'eh

[IMAGE (Crab and fish)]

“You shall not eat anything abhorrent. These are the animals you may eat...those with true hooves that are cleft in two and that bring up their cud... These you may eat of all that live in water: you may eat anything that has fins and scales.” (Deuteronomy 14:3-9)

Commentary

Kashrut, or keeping kosher, has been a distinctive feature of Jewish life for millennia. Something that is *kasher*, or kosher, is fit or acceptable for its given context, and frequently appears throughout Jewish texts in the context of ritual objects or functions. The biblical system of *kashrut* as it relates to food is reasonably simple, though it is a bit more involved than these verses alone demonstrate; the complex body of contemporary *halakhah* (Jewish law) on *kashrut* is largely based upon expansion and elaboration by the rabbis in subsequent centuries.

Especially as it appears in Torah, *kashrut* has a lot to do with separation: categories of animals fit for consumption are separated from those that are not fit; dairy is separated from meat on the basis of another verse in this parasha, “you shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk” (Deut 14:21); and ultimately, a people who follows a strict set of dietary laws ends up eating, and living, mostly separately from others. But *kashrut* has many more layers of significance as well; “you shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk,” for instance, can be interpreted as a reflection of the Torah’s wariness about mixing the categories of life and death, and it can be viewed as a denouncement of unnecessary cruelty. Eschewing pig products was a way to distinguish the Israelite tribes from those of the neighboring pork-loving Philistines, and it can be a means to express loyalty to God and love of Jewish Peoplehood. These are only a fraction of the meanings that the practice of *kashrut*, in the many forms and foci it has taken over time, has accumulated.

The intentional eating choices that *kashrut* compels offer the opportunity to elevate the mundane act of eating into an affirmation of one’s values, multiple times each day. The necessary pause, consideration, and possible rejection of foods based upon abstract principles

is also a constant reminder that we cannot mindlessly and ceaselessly take from the world around us; there are consequences to wanton consumption in all of its forms, and holding ourselves back from what we crave in the moment for the sake of a greater goal can be both a powerful spiritual practice and a way to increase holiness in the world, one bite at a time.

Reflections and Connections

- Dietary rules appear in several places in the Torah, with three distinct phases to the sets of instructions. In the Garden of Eden, the first humans are told, “Of every tree in the Garden you are free to eat, but as for the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad, you may not eat” (Genesis 2:16-17). The rules given to Noah and his family after the Flood include, “Every creature that lives shall be yours to eat, as with the green grasses; I give you all of these. But you must not eat flesh with its life-blood in it” (Genesis 8:3-4). Once the Israelites make a covenant with God at Sinai, the laws expand to prohibit certain types of animals (Deuteronomy 14:3-21; see also Leviticus 11), require a particular manner of slaughter (e.g., Deuteronomy 12:20-24), certain cuts of meat and tithes that are reserved for the priestly class, and more. What do you notice about the differences between these stages, and what do you make of that evolution? How might the context around each set of rules relate to the changes from one stage to the next?
 - *Create it:* Rules related to food practices exist, often unspoken, in every culture, and frequently include elements of ethics, class, geography, technology, etc. How would you codify the unwritten dietary rules of your family, or the culture in which you grew up? Try presenting that code in

biblical style, and keep an eye out for similarities between your code and the Torah's.

- Compile a list of reasons you have heard, experienced, or can look up or imagine for keeping a practice of *kashrut*. Which do you find least, and most, compelling? Why?
 - *Create it:* Choose one aspect of the biblical *kashrut* laws that you find particularly interesting, and combine this with your favorite interpretation and/or justification for that practice, using this combination as a basis for creative inspiration. What emerges from viewing this law through that interpretive lens? Alternatively, try this with one of your least favorite interpretations; does the artistic process change the way you view the practice in any way?
- What are the values and traditions that nourish you, and influence the way that you nourish yourself? How might you incorporate a new practice into your eating habits that actualizes a principle or identity that is important to you?
 - *Create it:* Today, there are many different styles of *hechsher*, a symbol that certifies a product as kosher according to the issuing organization's standards. There are hundreds of different symbols, which vary by country and region (kosherquest.org/kosher-symbols has an easy-to-peruse visual guide). How would design a hechsher that reflects the values that inform your eating?

Shoftim

[IMAGE (A tree that has sprouted legs)]

“When in your war against a city you have to besiege it a long time in order to capture it, you must not destroy its [fruit] trees, wielding the axe against them. You may eat of them, but you must not cut them down. Are the trees of the field human to withdraw before you into the besieged city?” (Deuteronomy 20:19)

Commentary

Shoftim opens with the famous precept of “*Tzedek, tzedek tirdof*; Justice, justice you shall pursue” (16:20), a principle which echoes throughout the chapters of laws that follow. Deuteronomy 20:19, whence the ever-timely environmentalist principle of “*Lo tashchit*; you shall not destroy” is derived, is particularly striking because of the rhetorical question at the end, “are the trees of the field human that they can withdraw before you?”

The trees in question are seen as worthy of care and preservation not only because their fruits nourish the humans on both sides of the besieged city’s walls, but also because they cannot defend themselves. We are instructed to sympathize with the trees, rooted firmly in the fields, which can not control their own fates. How much more care, then, ought we show to fellow human beings, especially when their fates depend in part on our actions.

There is certainly some irony to the appearance of this remarkably sympathetic sentiment towards the local flora amidst a chapter concerned with conducting war against other human beings, which, today, may feel like a far cry from an ideal of justice. Understood within its biblical context however, when a “just” war was one undertaken at God’s command, this arresting verse curbs wanton destruction in a context where victory relies upon necessary loss, and compels the soldier to pause and think about the broader implications of each action and to do so with a measure of foresight and compassion. Cutting down an orchard is quick work compared to the years of cultivation it took for its trees to bear fruit, and removing a food source for the city under siege may yield a speedier victory, but at a high human cost. The parallels to today’s climate crisis--caused by centuries of short-sighted, expedient practices--are abundant.

At times we are the soldiers in the field, wielding the power of preservation and

destruction, and in others, we are on the opposite side of the siegeworks, dependent on the empathy of others, or we are the trees, rooted in the circumstances of our births and fates. No matter which side of the thin lines that separate these fates from each other we fall on at any given time, we must abide by the principle of “*lo tashchit*,” acting with empathy and foresight, if we are all to survive and thrive.

Reflections and Connections

- Human-tree analogies abound in Jewish texts. Rabbi Jacob ben Isaac Ashkenazi, in his commentary on this verse in *Tze'edah u'Re'edah*, suggests that “[The Torah compares humans to trees] because, like humans, trees have the power to grow. And as humans have children, so trees bear fruit. And when a human is hurt, cries of pain are heard throughout the world, so when a tree is chopped down, its cries are heard throughout the world.” In what other ways are trees and humans similar to each other? How does comparing humans to trees affect your understanding of trees, and of humans? (See also: Tu B'Shevat p. 259)
 - *Create it*: This challah design imagines a human-tree hybrid. How would you invent your own version of a tree-human that captures the analogous qualities that you find the most similar or interesting?
- The precept *Lo tashchit* applies more broadly than wantonly destroying fruit trees; Maimonides codified the commandment as “And not only regarding trees, but even one who destructively breaks vessels or rips up clothing or tears down a building or seals up a spring or wastes food violates the negative commandment of “You shall not destroy” (MT *Melachim u'Milchamoteihem*, 6:10). Maimonides wrote this

comment nearly one-thousand years ago; how would you expand the understanding of *Lo tashchit* to address contemporary issues, such as the environmental crisis?

- *Create it:* Using only recycled or cast-off materials, design an image or object that represents some or all of your updated interpretation of *Lo tashchit*.
- How would you apply *Lo tashchit* to human interaction and relationships? Should the principle function differently in cases where the people in question know each other or not, and why?
 - *Create it:* Rewrite the rhetorical question at the end of the verse in a way that emphasizes the human aspect of *Lo tashchit*. Then, illustrate the main idea of your interpretation through a visual analogy other than a tree.

Ki Teitzei

[IMAGE (Woven fabric w/tzitzit)]

“You shall not wear cloth combining wool and linen. You shall make tassels on the four corners of the garment with which you cover yourself.” (Deuteronomy 22:11-12)

Commentary

Boasting upwards of seventy *mitzvot*, this parasha contains practically no narrative at all, just commandment after commandment. Some are inspiring, some are unpleasant, and some are just plain confusing. Why should we not combine wool and linen in our clothing? For what reason should we attach tassels to the corners of our garments (but only four-cornered garments)? The simple answer is “because God said so;” no direct reason or immediately apparent meaning is given in connection with these laws, or many others like them.⁵⁸ It is our task as readers and practitioners to derive the significance of these instructions.

In this case especially, whether or not the wearer has any personal meaning in mind, the act of following these commandments projects a message nonetheless; these purposeful clothing choices are a marker of identity, both for the wearer and for those whom they encounter. Even today, the *tallit*--a ritual garment created expressly for the purpose of fulfilling this *mitzvah* after four-corned garments fell out of fashion--is a powerful and immediately recognizable symbol of adherence to Jewish faith and practice.

These two *mitzvot* appear along with seven other verses in this parasha that refer to cloth or clothing. Garments serve different symbolic and practical functions in these commandments; they might reveal aspects of one’s inner identity, as in the case above, or provide dignity in concealment (24:17). In some cases, clothing can be a source of blessing (24:13), or a piece of cloth could mean the difference between life or death (22:17).

Each day, we have an opportunity to fashion an identity through what we reveal and conceal with our clothing choices. Even something as humble and quotidian as a piece of

⁵⁸ Numbers 15:38-40 also refers to corner fringes and offers an explanation for them, and the Rabbis read these commandments as connected to each other. Ironically, they also rule that wool and linen are permitted to be mixed--but only in the case of these ritual fringes (*tzitzit/g’dilim*). See Ibn Ezra on Deut. 22:12.

fabric can speak volumes about who we are; by paying attention to the details of the source of the threads and the conditions of the stitchers, we have an opportunity to wear important Jewish values on our sleeves as well.

Reflections and Connections

- Compare and contrast the nine verses in this parasha that refer to cloth or clothing (Deut. 21:13; 22:3, 5, 11, 12, 17; 23:1; 24:13, 17; you may also need to read the verses around them for context). What similarities and patterns do you notice between some or all of these verses? What meaning might you draw from those patterns?
 - *Create it:* Fashion your own visual midrash on whichever of these verses feels most compelling to you, incorporating an actual piece of cloth, if possible.

What texture best conveys the meaning of this verse for you?
- How do you use clothing and other outward markers to convey parts of your identity, or not? What is at stake in those choices?
 - *Create it:* Design an outfit, piece of clothing, or accessory that reveals (or conceals) something important about yourself that you cannot convey with what is currently in your closet.
- What are some of the values that you wear on your (literal) sleeve through the clothes and accessories you wear? How might you further actualize your values through the clothing that you choose to buy?
 - *Create it:* Tell the story of a piece of clothing or an accessory of yours, using words, images, etc. How did you come by this item? What has it seen? How far back can you trace its origin?

Ki Tavo



[IMAGE (Basket of produce)]

“When you come to the land that the Eternal your God is giving you as a heritage, and you possess it and settle in it, you shall take some of every first fruit of the soil that you harvest from the land that the Eternal your God is giving you, put it in a basket and go to the place where the Eternal your God will chose to establish God’s name....And you shall enjoy, together with the Levite and the stranger in your midst, all the bounty that the Eternal your God has bestowed upon you and your household.” (Deuteronomy 26:1-2, 11)

Commentary

During their time in the wilderness, the Israelites never had to worry about where their next meal would come from; the manna that God provided appeared on the ground outside their tent flaps every morning, six days a week, without fail. But once they crossed into the Promised Land, procuring food required a lot of effort and luck. The back-breaking and time-consuming work of tilling and planting and tending and harvesting could all be for naught if a rainstorm arrived at just the wrong moment, spoiling the entire crop that would need to last until the next harvest season. When the Israelites first heard this commandment through Moses--to bring some of the *bikkurim*, the first fruits of each harvest, as an offering--they may not have been able to anticipate just how profound that action would be. Not only would it be a meaningful expression of gratitude for the miracle of the harvest coming to fruition in the first place, but also a prodigious proclamation of faith that these first fruits would not be the sole fruits of their labors, that they could sacrifice this assured sustenance and not go hungry months later as a result.

These precious offerings were delivered to the priests, who were not given a hereditary portion of land and therefore relied on these tithes to feed themselves and their families. The delivery came with a declaration as well, beginning with “My father was a wandering Aramean...” (26:5), an acknowledgement that this offering was only possible because God brought both giver and receiver to the land that produced this harvest, and a reminder that the privilege of inheriting land came with a responsibility towards all of its inhabitants, including the Levite and the stranger. Everyone, from every strata of society, was to come together to share and rejoice in the first fruits of each harvest as part of this beautiful ritual, a powerful vision of what it means to embrace gratitude and faith, generosity and joy

in a world in which we have few guarantees.

Reflections and Connections

- Read the declaration that was pronounced by the pilgrim upon delivering the *bikkurim* offering, beginning with “My father was a wandering Aramean” (Deuteronomy 26:5-10); note that this text also appears in the Pesach Haggadah. What is the pilgrim acknowledging with this recitation? What is important about connecting these points of the Israelites’ past to this moment of their present, the beginning of a new harvest?
 - *Create it:* Imagine a moment in the future in which something you are working on now comes to fruition. What is the declaration you would make, following the structure of the *bikkurim* recitation, that captures the journey to that intended destination? How might you create that declaration as a visual map without words?
- Recall an instance when you gave the equivalent of the *bikkurim*, the first fruits of your labor, to someone else. How did that feel? What did you gain through that process of giving?
 - *Create it:* Choose an image (perhaps a fruit or other food item) that symbolizes the *bikkurim* you offered. Try to draw or paint this image only by drawing the negative space around the object you have in mind; that is, draw only what appears to be empty. What does this process reveal for you?
- What are some of the ways that you respond to unpredictability on the path ahead? When have you experienced joy and gratitude in the face of fear or uncertainty? What made celebration possible in those moments?

- *Create it:* How would you capture the feeling of uncertainty in a color, shape, or texture? What would gratitude look like in a similar modality? What new feeling is produced by the interaction of these two colors, shapes, or textures?

Nitzavim



[IMAGE (Blue spirals below, white spirals above, starburst in the center)]

“Surely the Instruction which I command you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. It is not in the heavens that you should say, ‘Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us, that we might observe it?’ And it is not beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us and impart it to us, that we might observe it?’ No, for the word is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it.” (Deuteronomy 30:11-14)

Commentary

As Moses' farewell speech begins to wrap up in these final few parshiot, he turns to alternately pleading with and threatening the Israelites to follow God's commandments once they cross the Jordan without him. Moses has always been there with the answers for his people; any law that was too baffling, any situation that they could not solve for themselves, Moses could resolve through his direct line to the highest authority. Perhaps this protective shepherd--who had taken his people across a sea so that they might be free to observe God's laws, who had gone up to the heavens in order to bring back and impart those laws-- realized how scary it might be for his flock to have to rely only on their own memories and interpretations of the Torah he had given them for the first time. So he gives them this pep talk of sorts, a reminder of their own power and the consequent responsibility to turn the words he had taught them into thought, feeling, speech, and action in the new situations that lay on the road ahead.

The declaration that "*Lo bashamayim hi*; It is not in the heavens" is a powerful assertion of human agency and obligation. We are all personally responsible for living lives of holiness, integrity, and goodness, and we each possess the tools to actualize those Torah values in the world. We cannot cede this challenging task of bringing ourselves and our society closer to these fundamental values to some other person or entity--even, or especially, a powerful leader-- for the tools to do so are within the reach of every individual, and therefore, we all share in the obligation to work towards those solutions.

Before we seek answers from the outside, these verses suggest that we ought to begin by looking inward. What instruction emerges when we consult our own reason and the moral compass of the Torah inscribed upon our hearts? How will we use our words to bring that

torah into being, for ourselves and others? For when our own hearts and mouths are filled with *torah*, it is never beyond the reach of anyone who is near to us.

Reflections and Connections

- In the story of The Oven of Achnai (BT Bava Metzia 59b), the ancient rabbis were having an argument about a matter of *halakha* (Jewish law). Rabbi Eliezer was certain that he was correct in his interpretation, but none of the other rabbis agreed with him, and the *halakha* was determined by majority rule. Rabbi Eliezer called down miracle after miracle to prove that he was right, but to no avail. Finally, a Heavenly Voice (*bat kol*) called out in support of his ruling, but Rabbi Yehoshua stood up and shouted, “*Lo bashamayim hi*; the Torah is not in heaven!...The Torah was already given at Mount Sinai, we do not regard a Heavenly Voice.” The *halakha* was thus decided according to the majority rule, not Rabbi Eliezer’s interpretation. The Talmud adds that upon hearing Rabbi Yehoshua’s declaration, “God smiled and said, ‘My children have defeated me!’”
- How does Rabbi Yehoshua interpret *lo bashamayim hi*? Does it agree with how you understand this passage of Torah? Why or why not? How do you think Moses might have reacted if he had heard this story, and why?
 - *Create it*: The Talmud imagines God smiling while saying, “My children have defeated me!” at the end of this story. What emotions do you think are behind God’s smile? How would you convey the emotions of Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Yehoshua, and God at the end of the story using only color?
- These verses, along with other selections from this parasha, are read on Yom Kippur

in many Reform congregations. How does this *parasha* speak to the themes of the Day of Atonement (see Yom Kippur, p. 232)?

- *Create it:* Imagine what the *torah* that is in your heart might look like. How does it get there? How do you read it?
- “Torah” has a wide range of meanings; it is the Hebrew word for teaching or instruction, it can also be used to refer to Written Torah (either the Pentateuch or all of Tanakh), Oral Torah (Rabbinic writings), the teachings of Jewish tradition writ large, and even to the truth or teaching of an individual’s experience. How do you define “Torah?” What does it mean for you to have *torah* in your mouth and in your heart?
 - *Create it:* Visualize the important pieces of *torah* (however you define it) that you have learned in your life in the form of a patchwork or collage. How does this compare to your overall image of Torah and its teachings?

Vayeilech



[IMAGE (Many small rounds collected by a semi-finished circle)]

“Gather the people—men, women, children, and the strangers in your communities—that they may hear and so learn and revere the Eternal your God, and to faithfully observe all the words of this Torah.” (Deuteronomy 31:12)

Commentary

The ancient Israelite religious practices detailed in the Torah sometimes differ wildly from those of contemporary Judaism, but this verse highlights one of the many beautiful points of continuity. In one of his final acts of leadership, so that the teachings and commandments that Moses spent so much of his life recording and delivering to his people would be constantly renewed in every generation, Moses institutes a reading of the Torah before the whole community on Sukkot during the *shemittah* (sabbatical) year. This commandment became such a cornerstone of Jewish practice that once every seven years became even more than once every seven days; Torah is read aloud and studied at multiple times a week in most Jewish settings. What is especially remarkable for its time is that Moses' instruction explicitly includes every member of the community--not only the men, but the women, children, and even resident foreigners--in the injunction to hear, and more importantly, to learn, from the Torah.

Every single member of the community is equally obligated to listen and to study, which suggests that in turn, each and every person consequently has a right to be heard, and therefore has something important to teach. We are each part of a chain of hundreds of generations of Jews who have engaged with Torah, and when we add our own voices to the conversation, we become linked to generations past as well as to our contemporaries all around the world who study these same words. Though our interpretations may differ--even dramatically-- mutual engagement with these timeless and timely teachings connects us to each other, re-gathering the Jewish People again and again across time, space, and culture. Torah brings us together, and when we open our ears to learn the *torah* that we all have to teach, it keeps us together as well. Torah belongs to all of us; it is yours to cherish and to

challenge, so long as you are willing to listen and to learn.

Reflections and Connections

- Medieval commentator Ibn Ezra adds a step between the acts of listening and learning in this verse, saying, especially of the stranger and the child, “When they will listen, they will ask; and [then] they will learn.” What is the effect of this extra verb’s addition in Ibn Ezra’s explanation?
 - *Create it:* Picture the gathering of the people as it is described in Deuteronomy 31:12. Where are the people facing? Who is speaking? What are people’s hands doing? Visualize the crowd again, but this time, according to Ibn Ezra’s interpretation. In what ways does it look the same, and how does it differ?
- When have you experienced a connection through Torah, either to someone you knew or someone you did not know? Have you ever encountered moments of connection across significant difference over a matter of Torah (broadly understood)? What were some of the other factors at play in the situation that made this connection easy or challenging?
 - *Create it:* Using only the words of Torah that led to one of these moments of connection-- whether in English or Hebrew, whether they are the words of a specific verse or a summary of the idea-- create an image that conveys linkage. Consider how you might stretch or contract the letters, group or ungroup words, and curve the lines of sentences to achieve your desired effect.

- Find a verse of Torah that is particularly resonant for you, and find as many different commentaries on that verse as you can-- from ancient commentators, contemporary scholars, artists, friends, whomever. How wide is the range of interpretive possibilities for that one verse? Can you come up with another interpretation that expands this range even wider while remaining true to the text?
 - *Create it:* Choose your favorite artistic medium and use it to render your unique interpretation of the verse into a visual or structural form as well.

Bonus: create representations of other commentaries on this verse that are the most resonant (or dissonant!) with your interpretation, and find points that might connect them to each other. How might one interpretation lead into another?

Ha'azinu



[IMAGE (Braids in the pattern of the Ha'azinu text)]

“Give ear, O heavens, and let me speak; Hear, O earth, my mouth’s utterances.”

(Deuteronomy 32:1)

Commentary

Shirat Ha'azinu, also known as the Song of Moses, is an ancient biblical poem and is one of the few sections of the Torah scroll that is formatted in a special style: the usual columns of justified text are broken into two thin parallel columns with space in between. The shape of the text in the Torah mirrors the structure of the poem itself, which is composed in characteristic biblical parallelism. In this classic poetic form, each verse is generally composed of two halves, the second of which is similar in meaning to the first, but intensifies or builds upon it in some way. It may sound repetitive at first-- much like the whole book of Deuteronomy!-- but careful attention reveals that in the space between the first and second iteration, there is a pregnant pause, room for subtle or seismic shifts of perspective.

Moses' epic invocation in this poem that is to serve as his witness after he is gone suggests the importance of listening with that level of intention. The first word of the first column of text is *Ha'azinu*: give ear/harken/consider, and across the space between, the first word of the second column is the parallel word, *V'tishma*: hear/listen/obey.

What does it mean to listen in the way that Moses demands? It is more than merely turning our ears towards the speaker, letting their words bounce off of our eardrums. *Ha'azinu* is related to the word for weighing or balancing, indicating that when we really listen to someone, we give them due consideration, feeling the weight of their words and holding them in balance with our own. *V'tishma* carries the weight of the command *Shema* (pay attention/obey/listen); listening is not a passive exercise, it requires our full engagement, even, perhaps, resultant action. It is only when we engage in this kind of listening with others that we are open to a shift in perspective, and that we are able to hear the soul that emerges through the pauses. Through deep, intentional listening, especially to the possibilities of the

spaces between the words, we have the power to witness a being into speech, and speech into being.

Reflections and Connections

- *Shirat Ha'azinu* shares the distinction of being a uniquely-shaped text within the Torah scroll along with two (and a half) other discrete sections: *Shirat HaYam* (The Song of the Sea, Exodus 15:1-19) and *Aseret HaDibrot* (The Ten Commandments, Exodus 20:1-14 and Deuteronomy 5:6-18). What do these three (three and a half) texts have in common with each other? Why do you think these texts in particular are shaped differently, and what does the unique shape contribute to the way you read or understand the text itself?
 - *Create it:* Micrography, a Jewish art form developed in the 9th century, utilizes microscopic Hebrew calligraphy to create decorative forms, usually as adornment for Torah manuscripts (usually for study, not the scrolls for public reading, for which decoration is not permitted). Choose a Hebrew text that is significant to you-- a word, a verse, a whole section-- and use the words to create a form that communicates why it is meaningful for you. If you are not comfortable with writing in Hebrew, use the English translation.
- When has your perception of another person changed significantly through the experience of listening to them in a *ha'azinu* or *v'tishma* manner? What were some of the factors that made this transformation possible, from both you and the other person?
 - *Create it:* Having our own deepest stories, beliefs, or emotions heard and

recognized by another person can be transformative, and it can also be a vulnerable experience; sharing art or other personal endeavors can be as well. Create a piece of art that expresses a deeply-felt truth about yourself, and find someone with whom you are comfortable sharing it. What does this experience feel like before, during, and after sharing your piece? What do you learn as a result of this exercise?

- “Music is the space between the notes,” Claude Debussy said; sometimes, it is the moments of silence, or what is written between the lines, that convey meaning with greater depth than words or sound alone can achieve. When have you experienced silence or subtext that had great emotional power? How did you react to that experience in the moment, and in what ways did it affect you afterwards?
 - *Create it:* In the artistic medium of your choice, use silence, stillness, or blank space to convey an idea or emotion based on your recollection from the reflection above, or one from this parasha. What does it take on your end to capture this concept? What is required of the viewer or listener to complete the transfer of that notion from you to them?

The Cycle of the Year

<u>Rosh Hashanah / Rosh Chodesh Tishrei</u>	<u>228</u>
<u>Yom Kippur</u>	<u>232</u>
<u>Sukkot</u>	<u>236</u>
<u>Simchat Torah</u>	<u>240</u>
<u>Rosh Chodesh Marcheshvan</u>	<u>243</u>
<u>Rosh Chodesh Kislev</u>	<u>246</u>
<u>Chanukah</u>	<u>249</u>
<u>Rosh Chodesh Tevet</u>	<u>253</u>
<u>Rosh Chodesh Shevat</u>	<u>256</u>
<u>Tu B'shevat</u>	<u>259</u>
<u>Rosh Chodesh Adar I</u>	<u>263</u>
<u>Rosh Chodesh Adar II</u>	<u>266</u>
<u>Purim</u>	<u>269</u>
<u>Rosh Chodesh Nisan</u>	<u>273</u>
<u>Pesach</u>	<u>276</u>
<u>Rosh Chodesh Iyar</u>	<u>280</u>
<u>Yom HaShoah</u>	<u>283</u>
<u>Yom HaZikaron / Yom Ha'atzmaut</u>	<u>287</u>
<u>Rosh Chodesh Sivan</u>	<u>291</u>
<u>Shavuot</u>	<u>294</u>
<u>Rosh Chodesh Tammuz</u>	<u>297</u>
<u>Rosh Chodesh Av</u>	<u>300</u>
<u>Rosh Chodesh Elul</u>	<u>303</u>

Rosh Hashanah/ Rosh Chodesh Tishrei

[IMAGE (Apple and Pomegranate challot)]

“In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe a complete rest, a sacred occasion commemorated with loud blasts [*teruah*].” (Leviticus 23:24)

Commentary

Rosh Hashanah is the beginning of the Jewish year, the birthday of the world, and one of our most important holidays. It is both celebratory and serious; we look with optimism to the year ahead, and focus on doing the important spiritual work of *teshuva* (repentance, return) in order to make that positive vision a reality. One way in which Jews have long sought to manifest hoped-for blessings and intentions is by eating symbolic foods, and Rosh Hashanah has more of them than any other holiday.

Among the many fascinating culinary customs for Rosh Hashanah, the best known is that of eating sweet foods at Rosh Hashanah meals, such as apples and challah dipped in honey, in hopes for a good and sweet new year (*shanah tovah u'metukah*). There is an ancient custom of eating a fruit one has not eaten in a long time in the meal on the second day of the holiday, so that the *shehecheyanu* blessing (expressing gratitude for reaching a significant moment or having a new experience) can be recited on both days. Pomegranates are often used for this purpose, not only because the beginning of their season generally coincides with Rosh Hashanah, but also because they carry other symbolic meanings, such as fruitfulness, fertility, and righteousness. In Jewish lore, the pomegranate is believed to have 613 seeds, corresponding to the 613 *mitzvot* (commandments) of the Torah; hence, the tradition of saying “may we be full of merits as the pomegranate [is full of seeds]” before eating this fruit as part of the holiday meal ((Rama on Shulchan Aruch, Oreich Chaim, 583:1).

Sweet fruits also make their way into special challot that are traditional for this holiday. Incorporating raisins or other dried fruits is common, and for some bakers, this addition distinguishes the round challot for this holiday from the round challot that are made

throughout the rest of the High Holy Day season. Round challah symbolizes, among other things: the cycle of the year, the head (*rosh*), and the crown with which we acknowledge God's sovereignty in the High Holy Day liturgy.

The Rosh Hashanah table is laden with concrete symbols of the power and prayers of the holiday--a beautiful and delicious reminder of our responsibility to turn our repentance and resolutions into reality as well.

Reflections and Connections

- The foods of the Rosh Hashanah table are intended to help manifest our wishes for the year to come. What are some of the benefits and drawbacks of making something abstract into something physical?
 - *Create it:* Experiment with using a physical object as a reminder for yourself over the course of a week; like the proverbial string around the finger, but choosing something that specifically matches your intention. What effect does the process of choosing or creating that object have for you? How does having the physical reminder affect the fulfillment of your intention?
- What are your prayers, resolutions, or blessings for the year ahead? Which foods or flavors best capture the essence of each of these for you?
 - *Create it:* Design a menu of how you hope the next year will taste, and if you can, make it for the holiday. You might also focus on one of these ideas and highlight it through a special dish or challah design.
- Rosh Hashanah is both a celebration of the new year as well as a day of judgment, in which God is said to open the book of our days and see what is written there, and to

pencil in our fates for the year to come (the ink comes out on Yom Kippur, and dries on Hoshana Rabbah/Simchat Torah). What connects these two ideas with different emotional resonances, and helps them work together in one holiday?

- *Create it:* Imagine what God's "Book of Life" might look like, and how your page for this past year might appear. Using any materials, represent your last year in words, images, sounds, etc. How would you represent its merits and demerits?

Yom Kippur



[IMAGE (Spiral of braids, white bowl in center)]

“Mark, the tenth day of this seventh month is the Day of Atonement. It shall be a sacred occasion for you: you shall practice self-denial...you shall do no work throughout that day. For it is a Day of Atonement, on which expiation is made on your behalf before the Eternal your God.” (Leviticus 23:27-28)

Commentary

Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, is the holiest day of the Jewish calendar. We are judged, and we judge ourselves, for our actions over the past year. It is a day traditionally spent in prayer and self-denial (including fasting), as we hold up a mirror to ourselves and focus on atoning for the ways in which we have missed the mark.

“*Teshuvah* (return/repentance), *tefillah* (prayer), and *tzedakah* (righteous giving) temper judgment’s severe decree,” the high holiday liturgy tells us. What a beautiful reminder that nothing, no one, is beyond the possibility of redemption; there is always something that we can do to change and improve. And because change is always possible, this also means that we are always unfinished, always works-in-progress. Our sights are not to be set on achieving perfection; we are only human, after all. Rather, we strive to continuously become better versions of ourselves with each new circle around the sun.

While the focus of the day is on personal and communal atonement for what went wrong, this dedicated day of self-reflection also offers us the opportunity to look back on what went right. What were we able to change positively in the past year? Which negative habits did we overcome? When were the ‘do-over’ moments where we faced a scenario we had mishandled before, and did a much better job this time around? What were those moments where we can clearly see that our soul-work on Yom Kippur last year made a difference? Looking back at those moments of successful *teshuvah* may also offer us insights as to how to make this year’s *teshuvah* stick as well, so that our resolutions to improve do not fade away like memories hunger pangs after the break-fast. Our past mistakes, as well as our past successes, are intertwined and integral to the ongoing project of becoming who we are meant to be.

Reflections and Connections

- This challah design transforms the traditional round high holy day loaf into a commentary on *teshuvah*. Using the commentary as well as your own associations with Yom Kippur and the *teshuvah* process, come up with as many interpretations as you can for each element of this challah's abstract design: the spiral shape, the alternating finished and unfinished arms of the spiral, and the empty white bowl in the center.
 - *Create it:* Using these elements as a starting point (spiral, finished/unfinished, empty/white), create a different design in challah or another medium. How does the interpretive resonance of each element change in your new arrangement?
- Depending on one's view of the human capacity to change, *teshuvah* might be seen as a process of making the best of a fundamentally unchanging set of characteristics, or as a process of creating a new and different self (these are, of course, not the only possible understandings of *teshuvah*). Which of these interpretations resonates most with you, and why? Based on this answer, what do you think is the most effective means of self-improvement or self-actualization?
 - *Create it:*⁵⁹ Have someone collect a small bag of 8-10 random recycled objects or crafting supplies for you, or do this for yourself. Set a timer for 30 minutes, and using tape, glue, or any other supplies you might need, create something new from these objects. When you are finished, reflect on what you have made, as well as the process by which you made it. Did you leave any objects

⁵⁹ Adapted from a workshop on *teshuvah* with Rabbi Adina Allen from The Jewish Studio Project.

out? Did you bring in anything new? What might this process teach about *teshuvah*?

- Reflect on the last year and find one moment when you made a better choice than you had in a similar situation in the past. What did you do differently, and why did you do it? Think of a change you would like to make in this coming year, and apply the lessons of that past success to this new aspiration. What are some concrete things you can do to make that aspiration a reality in this new year?
 - *Create it:* Create two side-by-side representations of a situation you would like to handle differently in this next year: one in which you make no changes to how you would have handled it last year, and one in which you change one part of the image to reflect a better outcome. What is the single-most important change you can make, and how does that one change affect the whole image?

Sukkot



[IMAGE (lulav and etrog)]

“On the first day you shall take the product of hadar trees, branches of palm trees, boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before the Eternal your God seven days....You shall live in booths seven days; all citizens in Israel shall live in booths, in order that future generations may know that I made the Israelite people live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I the Eternal your God.” (Lev. 40-43)

Commentary

Sukkot is a holiday of gathering. It is the fall harvest holiday--one of the *shalosh regalim*, the three biblical pilgrimage holidays--a time when our ancestors gathered in the crops that would sustain them through the winter months, then traveled to Jerusalem to gather together as a whole community to offer their thanks and the first fruits of the harvest to God. Sukkot is a time when we gather together to celebrate the bounty of the season, inviting family, friends, and the *ushpizin*--guests from biblical tradition--to share meals in our *sukkot*. The impermanent *sukkah* includes a permanently open door; just as it is open to the wind and rain, it is open to those in need. The *sukkah* is a structure that gathers in everyone and everything, refusing none.

The *lulav* and *etrog*--also known as the *arbah minim*, the four species--serve as a distinctive ritual feature of this week-long celebration. The palm, willow, myrtle, and citron are gathered from trees in different regions of Israel and held together as we wave them in all directions as a reminder of God's presence all around us. Each of the *arbah minim* remains distinct but becomes part of a whole, one which cannot function if a single element is missing. So too, our bodies, our families, our communities, our countries are made up of diverse elements, each of which is necessary to enable the fullest functioning of the collective. Our worldwide Jewish family is made up of people with many different cultures, backgrounds, beliefs, and practices, because of which we are better able to serve God and bring Torah into the world. Though it is not always easy to gather together, the fragrant, beautiful, and fragile *arbah minim*, united for one week of the year, remind us that the effort it takes is worthwhile. As we wave these four species, we create a moment in which we are

intimately connected to God and to Creation, one in which we are reminded to look around and appreciate the sparks of holiness in everyone and everything we see.

Reflections and Connections

- The *lulav* and *etrog* set consists of four species gathered together: palm, willow, myrtle, and citron. In one midrash, each of these species is compared to a different part of the body-- the palm to the spine, the willow to the eye, the myrtle to the mouth, and the citron to the heart-- all of which praise God (Leviticus Rabbah 30:15). What are ways in which you use your body to connect to God, to Torah, to Jewish tradition?
 - *Create it:* The Rabbis imagined the *arbah minim* as four different parts of the body, based on the shapes of these leaves and fruit. How else might you reimagine these four species? What would it look like to bring them together?
- When have you experienced holiness through gathering? When has gathering been difficult, but worthwhile?
 - *Create it:* What does it look like to bring distinct design elements together into a cohesive whole?
- The *sukkah* is a temporary structure with few requirements: the roof must be made of materials that grow from the ground and have gaps through which one can see the sky, and one side must have an opening. These requirements have symbolic importance, reminding us of our reliance on God and nature, and our responsibility to welcome in guests and take care of those who rely on the community for support.

What structural elements, materials, and decorations would you use in your ideal *sukkah* to reflect other Jewish values that are important to you?

- *Create it:* Build that same structure out of natural and/or edible materials, or consider different ingredients you can incorporate into a challah that reflect these values.

Simchat Torah/ Parshiyot V'zot Habracha and Bereisheet



[IMAGE (Two big spirals against parchment background, burial and birth)]

“Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses, whom the Eternal singled out, face to face” (Deuteronomy 34:10);

“When the Eternal God made earth and heaven... the Eternal God formed *ha-adam* (the human) from *ha-adamah* (the dust of the soil).” (Genesis 2:4-7)

Commentary

Simchat Torah celebrates the simultaneous completion and resumption of the yearly cycle of Torah reading and study; it is a holiday of ever-growing spirals, circles that grow, layer upon layer, made up of a line that traces its past course while moving through a new area of space. We dance in circles and spirals around the synagogue with our spiral-wound *sifrei Torah* during the seven *hakafot* (Torah processions), shapes that recall the cycles of Torah study that help us mark the spiralled cycles of our lives. We complete the very last parasha of the Torah, V'zot HaB'racha, and immediately begin again--often in the same breath!--with the first parasha, B'reisheet, bending a linear history into a spiral of an ongoing story as we scroll back through the parchment, reliving the year's narrative in rapid reverse while rolling it into neat spirals.

Juxtaposing the end and the beginning of the Torah reminds us of our own lifecycles and the connections between different points of our lives. On Simchat Torah, the reader moves from the story of Moses' death to the birth of Creation and humankind; God buries Moses in the earth, then God creates the Earth, and fashions the first human out of earth. It is a profound reminder of a theme that echoes throughout the whole high holy day season: that even for someone as great as Moses, "dust [we] are and to dust [we] shall return" (Genesis 3:19), but also, that from this dust new life will arise. Everything on this earth is interconnected; all of our stories and strivings will lay a path for new legacies to trace and build upon in the generations to come. Torah, too, is endlessly reborn and expanded as each of us study its words and find new meaning in them, year after year, generation after generation. When we link our lives to this ongoing narrative tradition, we too live on through its repeated and renewed retelling, adding another layer to the ever-spiraling scroll.

Reflections and Connections

- When have you felt that moments in your life echoed your own previous experiences, or a story from your family history?
 - *Create it:* How might you represent those different moments such that the similarities and differences between them are both apparent?
- How does Torah connect to different points in your life? Where have you experienced the most profound moments of connection between Jewish tradition and the story of your own life?
 - *Create it:* What would it look like to fuse a story from the Torah with a related moment from your own life?
- What do circles and spirals symbolize for you?
 - *Create it:* Try answering this prompt with an image made up only of circles and spirals. Also, think about how you can use abstract shapes like these to deepen the meaning of other designs; for instance, I often use spirals to represent the Divine in my interpretive challot.

Rosh Chodesh Marcheshvan

[IMAGE (Moon phases)]

“And on your joyous occasions—your fixed festivals and new moon days—you shall sound the trumpets over your burnt offerings and your sacrifices of well-being. They shall be a reminder of you before your God: I, the Eternal, am your God.” (Numbers 10:10)

Commentary

This month is Marcheshvan, commonly called Cheshvan. It is the only month in the whole Jewish calendar that contains no holidays (aside from Shabbat), so some folks break up the name into two words: *mar-Cheshvan*, or “bitter” Cheshvan. Because Marcheshvan is holiday-less, we can focus on the beauty of Rosh Chodesh itself this month.

The first day of every Jewish month, and sometimes also the last day of the preceding month, is called Rosh Chodesh (head of the month). The Jewish month always begins with the new moon, when the sky is totally dark; the bright full moon marks the middle of the month, which is when most major holidays fall.

Rosh Chodesh is traditionally recognized as a special holiday for women; one midrash attributes the practice of women taking the day off on Rosh Chodesh to the merit of the women who refused to contribute their jewelry for the creation of the Golden Calf (Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer 45:4). Some also see this holiday as especially connected to those who menstruate, since that cycle is linked to the waxing and waning of the moon, just like the cycle of the month. In recent decades, Rosh Chodesh has become an occasion for Jewish women’s groups to gather for study, prayer, and other forms of spiritual practice.

There is something beautiful about celebrating a holiday on the new moon, which is precisely when the moon is not visible in the sky. It is an expression of faith, as well as a powerful reminder that just because someone or something is not seen, heard, or felt in a given moment does not mean that they or it is not important, and not worth seeking out and celebrating.

Reflections and Connections

- The waxing and waning of the moon is one kind of cycle that marks our progression through the Jewish year. What are other ways in which we mark time, especially sacred time? Why is it important to do so?
 - *Create it:* If you live somewhere where you can see the moon, take a few minutes on clear evenings to record the moon's progress throughout the month with a visual representation or written description, and to add a personal reflection from that day to each one. If you cannot see the moon, follow a moon phase chart, and create a quick piece of art using the shape of the moon that night as a starting point.
- Recall a time when you realized that someone or something was present but not visible. What caused this realization? What did it bring to the moment that would not have been there otherwise? How might you develop a practice of looking or listening for what is missing?
 - *Create it:* When have you experienced the presence of something that you could not see, hear, or touch at the time? How can you capture this invisible presence with a visible image?

Rosh Chodesh Kislev

[IMAGE (Pumpkin)]

“Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel says in the name of Rabbi Meir... [The second] half of Tishrei, all of Marcheshvan, and [the first] half of Kislev are the days of planting seeds. [The second] half of Kislev, all of Tevet, and [the first] half of Shevat are the winter days.” (BT Bava Metzia 106b)

Commentary

Kislev is a month of preparation and transition. With the abundant harvest of Sukkot long past, the arrival of Kislev sees the last seeds tucked into the ground for a long winter's nap and the last of the harvest preserved and stored away. As the month goes on, the days grow darker and colder, and humans and animals withdraw into the warmth and protection of their homes. Little wonder that the Sefer Yetzira names sleep as the primary action associated with this month (5:2); the nutrients sleep inside the seeds asleep in the ground, and above ground, the nights get longer and our sleep, hopefully, deeper. Nature focuses on preserving sustenance, warmth, and energy in preparation for the winter ahead.

Kislev can be divided into two Hebrew words: *kis* (pocket) and *lev* (heart). Many of us do not have the task of planting seeds in the ground during this month, so we might turn instead to what we plant in the pockets of our hearts to give us sustenance when we transition from one season of our lives to the next. What are the memories, the lessons, the dreams that will last to serve us in the future? Which do we store away, which do we actively cultivate? Which do we weed out so that they do not overtake that which is good? When we take care of our inner stores of emotional sustenance, the harvest has the potential to benefit not just us, but all those who rely on us as well.

Reflections and Connections

- If Kislev is the month of sleep, then it is also the month of dreams. What are the metaphorical seeds for your dreams that you are planting and cultivating in your life right now? What nutrients does each one need in order to grow? How are you

nourishing yourself during the growing period, until you harvest the fruits of your labor?

- *Create it:* Visualize the growing cycle for one of these seeds in your life. Pay particular attention to the transitions between phases: what changes? What causes these transitions?
- What are some of the significant memories, lessons, and dreams you have tucked away into the pockets of your heart from moments of transition in your life? Why were these seeds that you chose to keep? How have they sprouted in other periods of your life?
 - *Create it:* How can you capture the emotional resonance of one of these seeds in a piece that uses a single color, flavor, or material? What is significant about the color, flavor, or material that you choose?

Chanukah



[IMAGE (Oil lamp challah, with menorah behind it)]

“On the twenty-fifth day of the month [of Kislev] is Chanukah... When the hand of the Hasmoneans was made strong and they defeated the Greeks, they checked [in the Temple] and found only one jar of oil sealed with the mark of the High Priest which remained undefiled. Though there was only enough in it to light for one day, a miracle occurred through it and they lit the Temple lamps from it for eight days. The following year they decreed these to be eight days of celebration.” (Megillat Taanit, Kislev 7-8)

Commentary

The chanukiah, or eight-branched menorah, is the most distinctive symbol of the Chanukah celebration, and the six-branched menorah that once stood in the ancient Temple in Jerusalem has been a symbol of the Jewish people for thousands of years. From the ancient menorah, made up of oil lamps shaped like this edible version, to the chanukiyot of today made in every color, material, and shape, the significance of this ritual object often transcends its function. Yes, the chanukiyah sheds light—a reminder of goodness, transcendence, and joy—and reminds us of the Chanukah miracle, counting up the eight days of the holiday. Even more than this though, it also has become a powerful symbol of Jewish identity, a reminder of resilience, resistance, and the richness of our traditions. The evolution of the chanukiyah's shape over the centuries offers an important lesson as well (one which the Hasmoneans might not have loved, but too bad for them)-- that Judaism is always growing and changing as it passes from one generation to the next as each Jewish community adds their own unique perspectives and insights. The chanukiyot of the last two thousand years have all held the same flame, but each has fed and beautified it in its own way.

When we light our own chanukiyot, we are reminded that just as the oil we celebrate brings light to the darkness and adds richness to our festive foods, so too, the Jewish traditions and identity for which the Maccabees fought brings light and richness to our own lives, especially when we make those traditions our own. When we place our kindled chanukiyot in our windows, may we rededicate ourselves to causes of justice, be strengthened by the resilience of our ancestors, and give thanks for the freedom to be Jews in our own authentic, meaningful, and unique ways.

Reflections and Connections

- Think of a Jewish ritual object or symbol that holds special significance for you.

What is its ritual function, and what makes it significant to you? In what ways are the ritual function and its personal significance related, or not, and why?

- *Create it:* Choose a Jewish ritual object, and design your own version. Pay attention to the forms you use, as well as the colors, materials, and symbols that you choose. What is the idea, the story, the feeling, that each of these choices contributes to what you make, and why is it important to have those elements in your object?
- How is your Jewishness similar to the Jewishness of those who passed in on to you, whether they were your teachers, parents, or someone else? How does it differ? What are some of the ways in which you have made Judaism your own?
 - *Create it:* Create your own visual metaphor for the transmission of Judaism through the generations all the way to you (for example, a chain made up of links). Within the imagery of that metaphor, what does your Jewishness (i.e., your link in the chain) look like ?
- Chanukah means “rededication,” and the holiday offers us an opportunity to renew our dedication to causes, practices, or ideas that are important to us. Choose one thing that you wish to rededicate yourself to this year, and come up with eight small steps to turn that abstract desire into concrete reality. If you can, connect each of those steps to the ritual of lighting a new candle for each night of the holiday.
 - *Create it:* Try building up a single piece of art or writing over the course of the eight days of the holiday. Set a certain amount of time to work on it each

day, and add a little bit more each time, without changing anything from the previous days. When you have finished, look back on the completed whole and reflect on how each day's work added to or illuminated the initial idea.

Rosh Chodesh Tevet



[IMAGE (Concentric circles of chocolate dough with a little light in the center)]

“Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus, in his royal palace, in the tenth month, which is the month of Tevet, in the seventh year of his reign. The king loved Esther more than all the other women, ... so he set a royal diadem on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti.” (Esther 2:16-17)

Commentary

Rosh Hodesh Tevet is the darkest night of the darkest month of the year, as this month usually contains the winter solstice, it has the longest nights of the year, and the new moon of Tevet is dark in the sky. And yet, this time also coincides with the final days of Chanukah, when the chanukiyot are at their brightest, a reminder that we can always kindle increasing light to counteract encroaching darkness. Even one little candle is enough to bring light to the darkest of places.

There is a long-standing tradition in North African Jewish communities that Rosh Hodesh Tevet/ the 7th day of Chanukah is also Chag HaBanot (the Festival of Daughters) in which women prayed for each other, exchanged gifts, and honored female leaders and heroines.

The month of Tevet is associated with two awesome biblical heroines, Esther and Judith. The only explicit mention of Tevet in the Tanakh is in the Book of Esther, when she is chosen to be the new queen. Judith's story is traditionally linked up with Chanukah, likely because of the parallels between her story in the Book of Judith and that of the Hasmoneans in the Book of Maccabees (neither of these books are part of the Tanakh). Judith's city was under siege by the mighty Assyrian army, and when the Israelites had all given up hope of winning, Judith, a young widow, snuck into the enemy camp, fed the general Holofernes salty cheese so that he would drink too much wine, and then when he fell asleep, she cut off his head with his own sword. In honor of her clever and brave victory strategy, it is customary in many Jewish communities around the world to eat salty cheese dishes during Chanukah.

Reflections and Connections

- How do you bring metaphorical light to moments or places that feel especially dark?

Where do you turn for sources to fuel that light?

- *Create it:* Try sitting in a darkened room with a single lit candle nearby. Let your eyes adjust to the darkness for a little while, then try drawing what you can see by just the light of the candle. How far does the candle's light go in the room, when you look closely?
- Who are some of the women (or women-identified folx) that you most admire, whether from the bible, history, stories, or the present? What are the qualities you most admire in them?
 - *Create it:* What would a holiday honoring your heroine look like? What foods would you serve, what outfits would you wear, what ceremonies would you perform? What day would it be held? Try actually holding this celebration the next time that date rolls around-- how does it feel to a holiday whose sole purpose is to celebrate a woman or group of women?

Rosh Chodesh Shevat

[IMAGE (Water pouring from a jar)]

“When the Holy One wishes to bless the sprouting of the earth and give food to all creatures, God opens the good treasures that are in the heavens, and causes the rains of remembrance to fall upon the earth...and sprout seeds of blessing.” (Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer 5:5)

Commentary

The month of Shevat marks the height of the rainy season in Israel, and fittingly, the traditional symbol of the month of Shevat is a jar of water. Shevat is a month of renewal and nourishment, and water, which is constantly renewed through the water cycle, is the ultimate source of nourishment for our bodies and our world. Though water seems like an endlessly renewable resource, it only takes one season of drought or a hike with an empty water bottle to remind us that drinking water is a truly precious gift. It is little wonder that our ancestors saw rain as one of the primary indicators of God's favor and benevolence.

Rain reconnects the primordial waters (*mayim*) that existed before Creation (Genesis 1:2), which were separated into the heavens (*shamayim*) and the seas (*yamim*) on the second day (1:6-8). The water that rain brings, therefore, not only gives life to plants and animals, but renews a deeper Divine harmony in the world, nourishing the sparks of divinity that animate the whole of Creation.

In the middle of this month, we celebrate the New Year for trees; the restorative rains of Shevat give those trees the nourishment they need to blossom and produce fruit in the spring. As with trees, the results of the nourishment we give ourselves often takes time to flower and bear fruit. What a beautiful reminder to be kind to and take care of ourselves, and to be patient as we wait for the fruits of our efforts to ripen.

Reflections and Connections:

- Water is often used as a metaphor for Torah in Jewish texts; an especially detailed and beautiful example can be found in the midrashic text *Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 1:2. One line from this long list of similes notes that “just as water speaks in many voices,

so too does Torah speak in many voices” (ibid). What are some of the “voices” in which water speaks? Consider the sounds it can make, the forms it can take, and the effects it leaves in its wake. How does this compare to the multiplicity of “voices” in which Torah speaks?

- *Create it:* How could you capture the nuances of one of these “voices” in a non-verbal, non-written way? Alternatively, how many different “voices” of water or Torah could you represent in a single composition?
- Water can produce all manner of amazing transformations in nature, and Jewish tradition also sees water as having the power to help human beings transform from one state to another. The most notable example today is the *mikvah*, a collection of *mayim chayim*, “living waters” in which a person immerses in order to mark a transition from one life stage to another, including conversion, marriage, death, and many other occasions. When have you experienced water as a transformative substance?
 - *Create it:* Create a piece of art using a mostly dry medium-- water-soluble ink from pens or markers, colored chalk, colored tissue paper, barely-wet watercolor, etc.-- and then begin to add water to it, however you would like to do so. Watch to see how the work transforms as it interacts with the water. How do you feel about the finished piece?

Tu B'Shevat



[IMAGE (Tree)]

“The first of Shevat is the new year for trees, according to the words of Beit Shammai. Beit Hillel says: on the fifteenth of that month.” (Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 1:1)

Commentary

Tu b'Shevat, which literally means the fifteenth of Shevat,* is known as the new year for trees. This new year (one of four in the Jewish calendar) started as a practical, tax-related way to determine the age of a tree. Over time, the holiday has evolved into an opportunity to celebrate the many gifts that these incredible lifeforms offer, as well as to channel a connection to *eretz Israel* by eating the seven species associated with the land, and to renew our commitment to *ba'al tashchit* and environmental stewardship.

Trees are natural wonders. They contain entire ecosystems within themselves, and there is reason to believe that some trees are able to share resources and even information through their root systems. Using nothing more than water, carbon dioxide, soil, and sunlight, trees are able to provide nourishment and protection not only for themselves, but also for land and atmosphere, animals and humans. In Jewish tradition, trees are also metaphors for Divinity, Torah, and much more, including human beings.

Like trees, we draw nourishment from our roots, our connections to the people and communities that nurture and sustain us. Like trees, we can blossom and spread our own blessings far beyond ourselves as we grow and branch out. And like trees, we carry the stories of our years deep in our cores. The rings of a tree narrate its years of abundance and of struggle, concentric chapters that chronicle its own story in relation to the larger forces at play in the surrounding world. All of those stories are locked inside of the tree, only revealed when it is eventually felled, whether by nature or human hands. Fortunately, we are able to tell our stories during our lifetimes--though even still, it is not always easy to read the story of our rings aloud and reveal the core of who we are. Whether we are looking at a tree, which contains decades or centuries of secret stories, or another person, containing secret stories of

their own, this holiday reminds us to treat the bearers of that which is shrouded and sacred with the wonder and respect they deserve.

*Beit Hillel won, as usual.

Reflections and Connections

- Starting with this book that you are holding in your hands, try to list in as many ways as you can how you have benefited from trees today. Compare this to a list of ways that you have benefited trees, or the environment in general, in the past week. See how much you can even out those two lists over the course of a week. What kind of changes do you make or extra steps do you take, and what effect do they have on you?
 - *Create it:* Choose one of the benefits on your list, and begin to explore what your life, or life in general, might look like without this quality. Use this exploration as a starting point for a piece that offers tribute to trees.
- Describe a time when you experienced plant life as being truly *alive*; alternatively, think of a time when you experienced a deep connection to yourself or to the Divine in nature. What did you feel or learn from this experience?
 - *Create it:* Illustrate your life, or part of your life, using a form inspired by a tree. For instance, you might create a self-portrait as a tree, thinking about who or what makes up your roots, your trunk, your branches; or, perhaps you could tell the story of your life inspired by the concentric rings of a tree trunk.

- Many kabbalah-inspired Tu B'Shevat seders include three categories of fruit, each of which represents a different level of creation: there are fruits which can be eaten whole, fruits with pits inside, and fruits with shells that must be discarded. Reflect on times when you have been like each of these categories of fruits in the past year: a time when you were fully at ease and able to be your truest self, a time when you hid something inside while appearing to be open, and a time when you were initially closed off and then revealed your inner self. What can you learn from each of these experiences?
 - *Create it:* Bake a challah or make a dish incorporating fruits from each of these categories. As you prepare each fruit and add it to the dish, pause to mentally trace the path this fruit took from being a seed in the ground to being your hands. How can you honor that miraculous journey in what you are making?

Rosh Chodesh Adar



[IMAGE (Spirals upon spirals)]

“When Adar enters, one increases rejoicing.” (BT Ta’anit 29a)

Commentary

Adar is a joyous month; indeed, according to the rabbis of the Talmud, Adar is the most joyous month of the whole year. The Sefer Yetzirah (5:2) ascribes the quality of laughter to Adar as its primary action, laughter being one of the quintessentially joyful sounds and feelings humans can express. Beginning on Rosh Chodesh Adar, as when the sun suddenly comes out from behind the clouds, everything in this month is meant to take on a newfound glimmer in which we can find delight. “*Mishenichnas Adar marbin b’simchah*; when Adar enters, one increases rejoicing” the rabbis say; whether or not we are feeling particularly happy, it is our job to “increase rejoicing.”

It seems a little strange to compel people to feel any particular way, especially to feel happy for an entire month. That simply isn’t how our emotions work, after all. Perhaps though, to “increase rejoicing” is not meant to teach us to paste on a smile to hide any sadness or anger we might be feeling because we’re supposed to be happy. Rather, it is a charge to seek out moments of gratitude, sources of hope, and opportunities for joy, and to be open to holding these sparks of happiness alongside whatever else we might be feeling. Even Purim, the holiday which gives Adar its festive character, has a darker side that we cannot fully drown out with groggers and wine; being able to see both the challenging and jubilant elements of the story and still choose joy is an important and recurrent lesson in Jewish history and tradition, one which Adar allows ample opportunity to practice.

Reflections and Connections

- What does the rabbinic injunction to “increase rejoicing” in Adar mean to you? How do you increase your joy when you are already feeling happy? How do you increase your joy when you are not feeling happy?
 - *Create it:* How would you best express pure joy without using words? Does joy have a particular color, symbol, taste, movement?
- Purim, which falls during Adar, has a distinctly festive and joyful mood, and while the *Megillat Esther* ends with a victory for the Jewish people, there are many challenging and unhappy aspects of the story as well. What are other Jewish holidays, stories, and traditions that draw from different poles of the emotional spectrum? Which lean towards festivity, and which towards solemnity? Why do you think this might be the case?
 - *Create it:* Imagine what one of these holidays, stories, or traditions might look like if the emotional valence was turned to its opposite (just like Purim is a day of turning things *hafuch*, upside down). What changes, and what stays the same?

Rosh Chodesh Adar II

[IMAGE (Pomegranate)]

“But Esther still did not reveal her kindred or her people.” (Esther 2:20)

“If Your Majesty will do me the favor, and if it pleases Your Majesty, let my life be granted me as my wish, and my people as my request.” (Esther 7:3)

Commentary

In a Jewish leap year, we get a whole bonus month, creatively named Adar II, which serves to keep the lunar calendar in line with the solar calendar so that the months continue to fall during the correct seasons. During a leap year, Purim falls in Adar II. The Hebrew phrase for “leap year,” *shanah me’uberet*, literally translates to “pregnant year,” suggesting fertility and a fullness of possibilities waiting to be revealed.

The pomegranate is laden with symbolic meanings in Jewish tradition (see Rosh Hashanah, p. 228) including fertility and virtue, connected to the many seeds it contains. Significantly, the pomegranate’s real beauty—and those inspiring seeds—are hidden from view until the fruit is opened. Its shell protects the treasure within, but also conceals it from the eye.

One of the many themes in the story of Purim is the contrast between what is revealed and what is hidden. Esther’s beauty is visible, but her true identity, and her incredible strength, are not revealed until late in the plot. God does not appear in name anywhere in the text, and is only revealed through the way the events unfold. During the Purim celebrations, masks and costumes conceal outer identities and allow for other sides of ourselves to emerge. The fullness of our identities is something to be treasured and protected; determining when and how we reveal the fragile parts of our souls to others, so that we can feel safe and seen as our whole selves, is therefore a delicate task, but one that is immensely important and rewarding as well.

Reflections and Connections

- In the Purim story, Esther chooses the right moment to reveal her true identity. What are the parts of your soul that you tend to conceal, and in what circumstances? When do you choose to reveal them? How does it feel to share those parts of your identity with others?
 - *Create it:* How many different ‘identities’ are you known by in the many circles of your life? Create an interpretive self-portrait of some kind for each of these identities. What do they have in common? What is most frequently missing?
- Since the Book of Esther does not contain a single mention of God’s name, one is encouraged to read the text with an eye towards seeing how the Divine works through human beings. In the story of your own life, where has the Divine worked through other people? When do you think the Divine may have worked through you?
 - *Create it:* Think about someone you love dearly; what do you think the Divine spark within them would look like? What do you think your own Divine spark looks like?

Purim



[IMAGE (Basket of hamantaschen)]

“Mordecai recorded these events. And he sent dispatches to all the Jews throughout the provinces of King Ahasuerus, near and far, charging them to observe the fourteenth and fifteenth days of Adar, every year—the same days on which the Jews enjoyed relief from their foes and the same month which had been transformed for them from one of grief and mourning to one of festive joy. They were to observe them as days of feasting and merrymaking, and as an occasion for sending gifts to one another and presents to the poor.... And Esther’s ordinance validating these observances of Purim was recorded in a scroll.” (Esther 9:20-22, 32)

Commentary

On Purim, we celebrate Queen Esther and Mordechai's salvation of the Jews of Persia from the designs of the King's evil advisor, Haman. We read the story from Megilat Esther (the scroll of Esther), wear costumes, feast, imbibe, and give gifts to friends (*mishloach manot*) and to the poor (*matanot l'evyonim*). A common component of the gifts given to others is the filled triangular cookie synonymous with Purim, called hamentashen (Haman's pockets) in Yiddish or *oznei Haman* (Haman's ears) in Hebrew. These challah-taschen feature flavors common to Persian cuisine: sesame seeds (in the form of halva), pistachio, and cardamom. If Queen Esther had made hamentaschen to celebrate her victory, her version might have tasted a little bit like this.

Though many of the hamentaschen varieties we eat today are filled with fruit preserves, or creative fillings like chocolate or funfetti, the original version was made with poppy seeds. The origin of the hamentaschen is a wordplay on a popular 16th century German poppyseed cookie, the mohntasche, or "poppy pocket." Because "mohn" sounds a lot like "Haman," the cookies caught on as a Purim favorite and underwent a name change. But the seedy filling already had religious significance; there was a longstanding custom of eating seeds on Purim based on the idea that Esther ate mostly seeds (also understood as legumes) during her time in the royal palace so that she could avoid eating unkosher food without revealing her Jewish identity (BT Megillah 13a).

Food is an essential part of identity; it connects us to culture, to family, to tradition, and also offers us the chance to innovate and tell our own stories of who we are. How fitting that Purim, in which the importance of food is second only to Pesach, is a time when we not only eat festive and symbolic foods ourselves, but are also obligated to share food with

everyone in our communities, from those in our inner circles to those on the margins. When we share our food, we share ourselves, and in so doing, we strengthen our communities.

Reflections and Connections

- What are some of the foods that are most closely tied to your identity/ies? What are their stories? Could you choose a single food that captures your identity/ies most fully? Why or why not?
 - *Create it:* Bake or cook a challah, a hamentaschen, or a dish that tells the story of your identity/ies. Consider combining recipes or ingredients that represent different aspects of your past and present and creating something new. Reflect on how you feel when you eat that food. Bonus: host a party in which every guest brings such a dish, and include an opportunity for everyone to tell the story of what they made.
- Given that eating symbolic foods in Jewish tradition is usually aspirational (like eating apples in honey for a sweet new year; see Rosh Hashanah, p. 228), how do you understand the peculiar practice of eating Haman's figurative accessories or appendages as part of the festive Purim celebrations?
 - *Create it:* If you were to invent your own symbolic food for Purim, what would it be? Which aspect(s) of the story would you choose to uplift, and how would you accomplish this through ingredients, shapes, etc.?
- The story and festivities of Purim feature frequent instances of the usual order being turned on its head. Oddly enough, the very holiday that we might see as the opposite of this one, Yom Kippur, is connected to Purim in the Zohar; Yom HaKippurim

becomes Yom Ha-ki-Purim, the day that is like Purim (Tikunei Zohar 21). What similarities can draw between these two holidays, and what do you learn from this comparison?

- *Create it:* In the medium of your choice, create a piece on a joyous theme.

When you're finished, try to create an exact opposite of the first piece.

Compare the two pieces; what connections can you find between these two theoretical opposites?

Rosh Chodesh Nisan



[IMAGE (Spring flower and vine)]

“Rabbi Eliezer says: In Tishrei the world was created...on Rosh Hashanah our ancestors’ slavery in Egypt ceased, in Nisan they were redeemed, and in Tishrei will be the future redemption. Rabbi Yehoshua says: In Nisan the world was created...on Rosh Hashanah our ancestors’ slavery in Egypt ceased, in Nisan they were redeemed, and in Nisan will be the future redemption.” (BT Rosh Hashanah 10b-11a)

Commentary

Rosh Chodesh Nisan marks the first day of the first month of the Jewish year, at least according to the Torah (Exodus 12:2). It is exactly half a calendar away from the better-known of the four Jewish new years, Rosh Chodesh Tishrei (see Rosh Hashanah p. 228; see also Tu B'Shevat p. 259). This new year, which arrives as the seasons change and leaves begin to reappear on the trees--Nisan is also called *Chodesh HaAviv*, The Spring Month--is all about rebirth, rejoicing, and redemption. Tishrei, arriving as the leaves begin to fall, is a different side of the same coin, with a focus on renewal, repentance, and return. Tishrei is associated with God's attribute of *din*, judgment; while the other side of the scale, *chesed*, lovingkindness, is associated with Nisan. In Tishrei, we search our souls for *cheit*, times when we have missed the mark; in Nisan, we search our homes for *chameitz*, leaven.

In the two weeks between Rosh Chodesh Nisan and Pesach, Jews all around the world prepare for the holiday by removing all *chameitz* from their homes. *Chameitz* is usually understood as leavened foods made from the five grains prohibited during Pesach--wheat, barley, oats, rye, and spelt-- but its original meaning may have been more like sourdough starter; when water touches flour, and when the mixture is left to sit over time, it will naturally begin to rise. *Chameitz*, therefore, is that which is allowed to sit for too long and become *chamutz*, fermented, leavened, or sour; *chameitz* is that which can rise up and take on a life of its own.

The rabbis understood *chameitz* to be a metaphor for the *yetzer hara*, the negative inclination within each one of us (see Rashi, BT Berachot 17a, *ad loc. se-or sheba'isah*). We can see this month, therefore, as a six-month check-up on our soul-work from Tishrei; what *chameitz* has been collecting in our souls, what grudges have fermented in our hearts, when

have our egos become over-risen? What can we clear away in order to experience freedom from the things that can hold us back, so that we can blossom like the trees in spring?

Reflections and Connections

- Jewish tradition has four different new years (see M. Rosh Hashanah 1:1), and we also have a plethora of other new years dates and seasons in cultures all around the world. In the text for this chapter, we see that Rabbis Eliezer and Yehoshua cannot agree on whether the world was created on the new year of Nisan or of Rosh Hashanah. Based on the natural world, feelings, and symbolic significance of the seasons in which the many new years of the world fall, which would you choose as the birthday of the world, and why?
 - *Create it:* How do you imagine the creation of the world might have looked? Would this change based on the season you chose for the birth of the world?
- *Chameitz* is that which can become *chamutz* (fermented, leavened, sour) if given sufficient time. How might this connect to another possible conjugation of this root, *lehachameetz*, which means “to miss an opportunity?”
 - *Create it:* What is something inside of your soul that has been left fermenting for too long and has taken on a life of its own? Try drawing out the evolution of this feeling, story, or issue from its inception to today. What do you notice has happened over time? Add one more step of what you think it would take to get rid of this piece of soul *chameitz*, and of how you might feel afterwards.

Pesach



[IMAGE (Braided Matzot)]

“You shall observe the [Feast of] Unleavened Bread, for on this very day I brought your ranks out of the land of Egypt; you shall observe this day throughout the ages as an institution for all time.” (Exodus 12:17)

Commentary

At the Pesach seder, we ask: why is this night different from all other nights? Well, for one thing, on this night, the challah is flat!

Pesach celebrates the quintessential story of the Jewish people, that of our redemption from slavery in ancient Egypt. We eat symbolic foods from the seder plate that help us re-live the bitter experience of slavery and the joy of freedom. Paradoxically, matzah represents both slavery and freedom at the seder. Matzah is first introduced in the haggadah with a recitation of *Ha lachma anya*, “this is the bread of affliction that our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt.” Its bare-minimum ingredients—just flour and water—help us to empathize with the experience of oppression and poverty that the Israelites suffered in slavery.

On the other hand, matzah’s speedy baking process—which, according to halakhah (Jewish law) can take no longer than 18 minutes total from mixing to completion—recalls the hasty flight from Egypt after Pharaoh finally relented and set the Israelites free (see Exodus 12:39). The very first bite that the Israelites would have taken as free people would have been of this unleavened bread. For them, that matzah was the flavor of freedom, even though its ingredients had not changed from the bread of poverty that they had eaten the day before. Different circumstances and a new mindset had the power to completely change the way they experienced even the most basic aspects of life.

“Let all who are hungry come and eat,” *Ha lachman anya* continues. The line between the afflicted and the free is thinner than we might expect, as the thin piece of matzah, whose flavor and meaning change based on circumstances and mindset, reminds us. Jews--who hold the communal memory of what it is like to be hungry, oppressed, and

Othered, who know how the whims of a Pharaoh or the promise new opportunity can completely change the course of a person's life--are especially called to the task of freeing and uplifting those who still suffer in the world today. Each bite of matzah that shatters into a million crumbs reminds us of the fragility of freedom, and that savoring its gifts and responsibilities gives this humble cracker a whole new flavor.

Reflections and Connections

- Which symbolic food of Pesach most resonates with you? What is its traditional significance? What do you associate with it?
 - *Create it:* How might you use this food as a medium to convey those associations?
- What does freedom mean to you?
 - *Create it:* Does freedom have a color? A flavor? A feeling? A sound? How can you capture what freedom means without using words?
- Recall a time when a different mindset or circumstance caused you to re-experience something in a completely different way. What changed between those experiences, both externally and internally, and how did it affect you moving forward?
 - *Create it:* Try to distill the essence of what changed between these experiences down to a single image or element. What does this element look like by itself? What does it look like when it interacts with a new image or element?

- What is an aspect of your own freedom that you especially value this Pesach? What can you do during Pesach this year to share the gift of that freedom with someone who does not yet share it?
 - *Create it:* What symbol might you add to your Seder plate as a prompt to discuss or reminder to accomplish this goal?

Rosh Chodesh Iyar

[IMAGE (Wheat Sheaf)]

“And from the day on which you bring the sheaf of elevation offering—the day after Shabbat—you shall count off seven weeks. They must be complete: you must count until the day after the seventh week—fifty days; then you shall bring an offering of new grain to the Eternal.” (Leviticus 23:15-16)

Commentary

Beginning on the second night of Pesach, we start counting each of the forty-nine days—seven weeks—between Pesach and Shavuot. This period is called the Omer, named after the first sheaf of the barley harvest that was historically offered up in the Temple from the beginning of this period, and the first sheaf of the wheat harvest offered at the end. We count the Omer during all twenty-nine days of the month of Iyar.

Counting the Omer offers a wonderful opportunity for building a reflective practice. One of the best-known frameworks for self-reflection during the Omer is the Kabbalistic tradition of focusing on the seven lower *sefirot* (emanations of God): *chesed* (lovingkindness, benevolence), *gevurah* (justice, discipline), *tiferet* (beauty, harmony), *netzach* (endurance, ambition), *hod* (humility, splendor), *yesod* (foundation, nurturing), and *malchut* (nobility, leadership). These *sefirot* are assigned to each day and week of the Omer: for instance, *chesed* is the theme of the first week, and also the theme of the first day of each week; day one of the Omer is therefore *chesed* within *chesed*, and the second day is *gevurah* within *chesed*, etc.

The month of Iyar is one of anticipation and preparation for reaffirming our covenant with God on Shavuot, a liminal space between redemption and revelation, between the first sheaf of one harvest and the first sheaf the next. As we bless our counting of each of these liminal days, we learn to count our blessings as well; when we stop to notice the uniqueness and value of each and every day—even the ones that are not marked by a memorable event—we come to notice the richness and texture of our everyday lives.

Reflections and Connections

- The kabbalistic tradition offers seven emanations of the Divine on which to meditate during the period of the Omer. If you were to create your own contemplative practice, which seven qualities would you want to focus on during the seven weeks of the Omer, and why?
 - *Create it:* How you might translate these qualities into challot, one for each week of the Omer? Think about choosing a color, an abstract shape, or a special ingredient symbolizing each quality that you work into your design.
- When have you experienced something changing day-by-day? What did it take to notice these changes? Did this experience reveal anything new to you?
 - *Create it:* For each day of the Omer, commit to a five-minute study of one thing, or one kind of thing, that you will capture in the same medium each time (e.g., a pencil sketch of what you see through the window, or a free-write on what your hair is doing that day). Keep each small study, and at the end of the 49 days, go through the changes you recorded and reflect on this process of study and attention. What has it taught you?

Yom HaShoah

[IMAGE (Yellow Magen David with candle)]

“We would assemble in the darkness. To light a candle there, or even a match, would have brought immediate disaster upon us. We spoke about matters of the spirit and eternal questions, about God, about Jews in the world, about the eternity of Israel. In the midst of the darkness, I sensed light in the unlit room, the light of Torah.” (Rabbi Leo Baeck, on teaching Torah in Terezienstadt)⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Mishkan Tefillah p. 527

Commentary

Yom HaShoah u'Gevurah (Holocaust and Heroism Memorial Day) is an Israeli national holiday that has been adopted as a Jewish holiday by many communities around the world, a day set to mourn a nearly unfathomable loss-- the murder of six million Jews by the Nazis--and to honor those Jews and non-Jews who resisted the Nazi regime. Many communities light six *yahrzeit* (memorial) candles, one for each million Jews murdered. This image includes only one candle, as a reminder that six million-- a number too large to really wrap one's head around-- is made up of individual, unique human beings: one, plus one, plus one, plus one, plus one, plus one...

Yom HaShoah focuses on the imperative *zachor*, remember. We remember the individual lives lost. We remember the corrupted social and political systems that allowed for the systematic murder of millions of Jews--as well as disabled and queer people, Roma and Sinti peoples, political opponents, and many others--to take place. We remember the complacency and complicitness of those who turned a blind eye to what was happening around them. We remember the courage of those who refused to accept this injustice, and put themselves at risk to protect the vulnerable. We remember that the legacy of this history requires us to say, and mean, "never again;" that we are required to fight hatred, bias, unjust and oppressive systems wherever they are found, and to ensure that we never end up on the side of the oppressor.

Zachor means to bring the past into the present, and to ensure that it carries forward into the future. *Zachor* is a promise and a charge-- that the memories of those lost will not live on in our minds alone, but in our words and in our deeds.

Reflections and Connections

- What does remembering the Holocaust mean to you? How does this act of remembering manifest itself in your behavior? What are some of the contemporary issues for which “never again” is a call to action?
 - *Create it:* What is the single image or symbol you can create that most powerfully captures the meaning of *zachor* for you? Can you capture multiple dimensions of the word at once, or is it better to focus on one that is most compelling?
- Numbers as large as six million are difficult to fully comprehend, at least as more than an abstract concept. What are some of the best methods you have seen that have made the scope of the loss of six million people--or another extremely high number--more fathomable? Why do you think these methods are particularly effective?
 - *Create it:* How can you concretize the scope of six million within a small-scale piece of art? Can you also capture the uniqueness of each one of those six million people in the same piece? If this is difficult, why do you think that is the case?
- How is the imperative of *zachor*, remember, as relates to the Holocaust similar to the frequent reminder throughout the Torah (e.g., Leviticus 19:34), as well as during the Pesach seder (see Pesach on p. 276), to *zachor*, remember, the Exodus from Egypt? How are these two kinds of remembrance different?
 - *Create it:* On Pesach, we eat matza as a way to literally internalize the memory of slavery. What kind of food would be an appropriate analogous

symbol for remembering the Holocaust? Try making and eating it; is it as effective as you expected?

Yom HaZikaron/ Yom Ha'atzmaut

[IMAGE (Israeli flag)]

“Eretz Yisrael was the birthplace of the Jewish people . . . After being forcibly exiled from their land, the people remained faithful to it throughout their dispersion, and never ceased to pray and hope for their return to it and for the restoration in it of their political freedom.”

(excerpt from Israel’s Declaration of Independence)

Commentary

In Israel, the national holidays of Yom HaZikaron (Memorial Day) and Yom Ha'atzmaut (Independence Day) are observed back to back. Yom HaZikaron is a solemn day of remembrance for the thousands of people who gave their lives for Israel's establishment and continued survival. In the middle of the day, air raid sirens sound for two minutes, and the nation comes to a stop, standing at silent attention for the entire duration. In a small country with compulsory military service which has fought many wars in its short statehood, everyone either is or knows someone who lost a loved one, and the air is heavy with mourning.

As night falls and the day ends, the somber mood shifts quickly to celebratory, and the nation transitions into Yom Ha'atzmaut. The holiday is always held on the fifth of Iyyar, the Hebrew date on which Israel's Declaration of Independence was first read aloud by David Ben-Gurion in Tel Aviv in 1948. Everything is festooned with Israeli flags, parks fill with picnickers, and the government awards its highest honor, the Israel Prize, to those who have advanced the nation's culture, science, arts, and humanities. While it is primarily an Israeli holiday, many Jews around the world celebrate Yom Ha'atzmaut as an expression of solidarity with Israel.

Regardless of the particulars of our politics and practice, Yom Ha'atzmaut can be a day to celebrate what Israel's statehood represents for the Jewish people in the scope of Jewish history. Ever since the first exile from *eretz Israel* in 586 BCE, Jews have “never ceased to pray and hope for their return to it and for the restoration of their political freedom” (Israel's Declaration of Independence), a hope that appears in every major work in the Jewish canon, including the Tanakh and the *siddur* (prayerbook). The Jews have been a scattered,

minority, disenfranchised people for most of their history, and a sovereign Jewish nation was a fantasy our ancestors probably could not even imagine coming true. Of course, the reality of that sovereignty has come with many, many challenges, and the work of creating a Jewish state with justice and peace for all of its inhabitants is important and ongoing.

Reflections and Connections

- The transition from Yom HaZikaron to Yom Ha'atzmaut is perhaps a tangible expression of Psalm 30:12, "You turn my mourning into dancing." What might make a transition like this possible, or not? When have you experienced a moment when you had to transition quickly "from mourning into dancing," and how did that feel?
 - *Create it:* Develop a short ritual, including a physical object, that would mark and aid in the transition between Yom HaZikaron and Yom Ha'atzmaut. Alternatively, create an image that captures the emotional qualities of this moment of transition.
- For much of Jewish history, part of what it meant to be Jewish was characterized by the absence of Jewish sovereignty in Israel. How does the modern State of Israel's existence affect what it means to be Jewish today?
 - *Create it:* For centuries, many Jewish homes and prayer spaces featured a *mizrach*-- a plaque that indicated the direction of Jerusalem, and therefore, the direction of one's prayers-- and many still do. The *mizrach* is a ritual object that might be seen as symbolizing a relationship to Israel for a Diaspora Jew. If you were to create a *mizrach* that captured the nature of your relationship to Israel, what would it look like?

- Like any anniversary, Yom Ha'atzmaut offers the opportunity to review the year that has passed, and to look forward to the year to come. What is your dream or prayer for Israel as it enters its next year of existence?
 - *Create it:* Visualize that dream in the medium of your choice, and consider pairing it with one concrete action that might bring that dream closer to becoming reality. To paraphrase Theodore Herzl, “If you create it, it is no dream.”

Rosh Chodesh Sivan

[IMAGE (Two brackets, above and below, connected by a spiral)]

“On the third new moon after the Israelites had gone forth from the land of Egypt, on that very day, they entered the wilderness of Sinai.” (Exodus 19:1)

Commentary

On Rosh Chodesh Sivan, the Israelites arrived at the Sinai desert, and began to prepare for the momentous occasion of receiving the Torah at Mt Sinai, which took place a few days later. We celebrate this giving and receiving of Revelation on the holiday of Shavuot, which is the main holiday of Sivan.

The *mazal* (constellation/zodiac sign) for Sivan is twins; a fitting symbol for a month defined by pairs. On the day when Moses ascended the mountain, and all of the Israelites gathered around the base, it is said that heaven and earth--a pair separated since the second day of Creation--came to meet each other, and connected at the top of Mt Sinai. The Israelites, when asked if they would accept the commandments, without even knowing what they were agreeing to, responded immediately with a pair of affirmatives: *na'aseh v'nishmah*, "we will do and we will listen." This moment of giving and receiving Torah is also likened to a marriage between a covenanted pair, whether the pair is God and Israel, or Israel and Torah. And of course, Moses will return from his long stay on top of the mountain bearing a pair of stone tablets, a record of God's words and *mitzvot*.

Sivan is a month of divine connection, a time when heaven and earth bend to meet each other, enabling new revelation to come into being. The same is true of human partnerships; when people bend to meet each other in love, compromise, or shared purpose, new ways of thinking and being come into the world, renewing divine revelation each and every day.

Reflections and Connections

- When have you experienced heaven and earth connecting in some way? What did you feel in that moment? Did any new insight or revelation result from the experience?
 - *Create it:* This challah design features an abstract interpretation of heaven and earth, or another of the pairs discussed in the commentary, coming together.

How would you create a more literal rendering of this idea?
- What sorts of revelations might occur when we bend to meet someone else? Choose examples from personal experience, and consider other scenarios from history or fiction. Which party benefits most in these scenarios: the one who has to bend further to meet the other, the reverse, or must both bend equally to benefit from the encounter? Why do you think this to be the case?
 - *Create it:* The story of when the Israelites receive the Torah at Sinai--when heaven and earth meet-- is intense, but we only hear what it was like from an earthly perspective (see Exodus 19:16-20:19), and can only really understand the benefit of the revelation that occurred from a human standpoint. How might you reimagine this experience from the perspective of the heavens?

Shavuot



[IMAGE (Open Torah Scroll)]

“You shall bring from your settlements two loaves of bread as an elevation offering; each shall be made of two-tenths of a measure of choice flour, baked after leavening, as first fruits to the Eternal.... On that same day you shall hold a celebration; it shall be a sacred occasion for you.” (Leviticus 23:18-21)

Commentary

Shavuot is the holiday of both bread and Torah; what could be more perfect for this book?

In ancient times, Shavuot, the third of the *shalosh regalim*, was marked with a special offering: two loaves of leavened bread. Meal offerings at other times of year were all unleavened, but this celebration of the first fruits of the wheat harvest called for something extra special; hence, this Torah-challah has two loaves incorporated into the design.

Today, Shavuot primarily celebrates the giving and receiving of Torah at Sinai; the two loaves became the two tablets as the Rabbis reoriented the holiday to maintain its relevance after the Temple was destroyed. A living link between the past, present, and future, Torah is the beating heart of the Jewish People. Torah is a gift that keeps on giving and growing: “Torah” encompasses the text that we call the Torah (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible) as well as the entire body of written and oral *torah* (instruction), canonical and otherwise. Every time we study Torah and come up with a new interpretation, a new insight, a new connection to our lives and circumstances, we add to the body of *torah*. And since, as tradition teaches, every Jewish soul that ever was or will be was present at Sinai (B. Shevuot 39a), we all have the right to add our works and words to the ongoing revelation of *torah*.

Bread is emblematic of all physical sustenance in Jewish tradition, and Torah is its spiritual equivalent. We need both physical and spiritual sustenance to maintain our bodies and souls; as my favorite line of Mishnah says, *Im ein kemach, ein Torah; v'im ein Torah, ein kemach*-- without bread, there is no Torah, and without Torah, there is no bread (Pirke Avot 3:17). Shavuot intertwines *kemach* and Torah, just like I do in this book; this holiday offers a

perfect reminder that our physical and spiritual sustenance can be even more fulfilling when each informs the other.

Reflections and Connections

- What are your primary sources of spiritual sustenance? Where do you go for wisdom, for inspiration, for connection?
 - *Create it:* Choose a piece of wisdom, inspiration, or learning that you have received from one of these sources, and create an image that encapsulates this idea for you. Try to capture the essence of the idea without incorporating words.
- When has physical sustenance intertwined with spiritual sustenance in your life?
 - *Create it:* Try to recreate something of that moment, perhaps by incorporating a key ingredient or flavor from your memory into a challah or another dish. How much of the spiritual substance of that moment can you bring back with physical substances? Which ingredients cannot be captured in this way?
- How do you understand the definition of Torah? What qualifies as Torah? What makes Torah meaningful for you?
 - *Create it:* This Torah design incorporates the beginnings of lines from the Ten Commandments on the open ‘parchment.’ What would you feature on an open Torah scroll design?

Rosh Chodesh Tammuz



[IMAGE (Sun)]

“On the first day of the solstice of Tammuz, no creature has a shadow; as it is written: ‘[The sun’s] rising place is at one end of heaven, and its circuit reaches the other; nothing escapes its heat’ (Psalms 19:7). The sphere of the sun has a sheath--as it is said: “The sun has a tent [in the heavens]” (Psalms 19:5)--and there is a pool of water before it. At the hour that it emerges, the Holy One weakens its power in water, so that it will not go out and burn up the world.” (Bereisheet Rabbah 6:6)

Commentary

Tammuz arrives at the height of summer; this month contains the summer solstice and some of the longest and hottest days of the year. In the *Sefer HaYetzirah*, the primary sense associated with Tammuz is sight.

On the seventeenth day of this month, the religious mood turns somber. The minor fast day of *Shiva Asar b'Tammuz*--which recalls the day that the walls of Jerusalem were breached, among other historic tragedies (see M. Taanit 4:6)--begins a three-week period (called *Bein HaMetzarim*, “between the straits”) of increasing levels of mourning leading up to the *Tisha b'Av*, when the Jewish people collectively mourns the destruction of the Temple and many other painful events in Jewish history.

The sun holds multiple meanings as a symbol for this month, both positive and negative. The sun provides light by which we are able to exercise our sense of sight. That light sustains life on earth, enabling the photosynthesis that powers the food chain and keeping the earth and its inhabitants sufficiently warm. But the sun's strong rays, especially evident in this month, have a destructive quality as well. Too much sun can burn our skin, wither leaves, and parch the earth. The space between having too little and having too much sun can be surprisingly narrow, and we must have enough foresight to protect ourselves and the resources on which we depend in order to minimize the destructive and maximize the productive elements of the sun's light. So too, we must use our senses of sight, insight, and foresight to protect against forces from within and without that cause harm, and to harness as much as possible of the good that sustains us.

Reflections and Connections

- Like the sun's heat, what are other qualities that are beneficial in moderation and detrimental in excess? What helps to keep these qualities in balance?
 - *Create it:* Light and sight are abundant in the month of Tammuz. Find an interesting light source and take the time to observe how it affects the environment around it. What would it look like to try to capture the light that you see, as opposed to its source or what it illuminates?
- The month of Tammuz is named after a Babylonian deity of vegetation, whose yearly "death," representing the end of the summer growth of plants, was ritually mourned; Ezekiel observes this idolatrous practice outside of the Temple in Ezekiel 8:14, which is the only verse in Tanakh that contains the name of this month. In fact, all of the names of the Hebrew months were adopted from the Babylonian calendar during the Babylonian exile in the 6th century BCE. What might this phenomenon and comparison teach us about the history of how Jews interact with other cultures?
 - *Create it:* Many ancient synagogues featured large floor mosaics that portrayed the months of the year in the shape of a wheel, using the signs of the zodiac-- also a Babylonian invention (see, for instance, that of the Beit Alpha synagogue). Create your own calendar wheel for the Jewish year, featuring symbols that you find appropriate to each month.

Rosh Chodesh Av



[IMAGE (Fire with rising smoke)]

“They said in the name of Abaye: Joy will come on Tisha B’Av, because while mourning is established in this time, in the future, the Holy One will turn it into a holiday, as it is written: ‘They shall come and shout on the heights of Zion...I will turn their mourning to joy, I will comfort them and cheer them in their grief’ (Jeremiah 31:12-13).” (Pesikta Rabbati 28:4)

Commentary

With the arrival of Rosh Chodesh Av, the period of collective mourning leading up to *Tisha b'Av* (the 9th of Av) intensifies, culminating in a day of fervent fasting and lamentation. *Tisha b'Av* is the saddest day in the Jewish year, on which the Jewish community mourns the destruction of both Temples as well as many other tragedies in Jewish history. Even for many contemporary Jews who do not specifically mourn the loss of the Temple--that loss is what enabled the Judaism we have today, after all--*Tisha b'Av* is still important, as it reminds us of the fiery, destructive power of *sinat chinam* (gratuitous hatred; see BT Yoma 9b) and we mourn its role in past and present tragedies.

Like the smoke that rises out of fallen ashes has a freedom to transform, to twirl itself into new forms and eventually dissipate; the intense grief of *Tisha b'Av* begins to lift and dissipate. Less than a week later, we celebrate *Tu b'Av* (the 15th of Av), a holiday of love. This quick shift from hatred to love and sadness to joy is a potent reminder that “to everything there is a season...a time for wailing and a time for dancing” (Ecclesiastes 3:1-4). It is important to grieve, to remember what has been lost, and it is also important to embrace the goodness of what we have, to commit to living life in all of its fullness and complexity.

The month of Av teaches us that whenever we can turn *sinat chinam* into *ahavat chinam* (gratuitous love), and sadness into sustained joy, we add another stitch to repairing the torn seams of our world.

Reflections and Connections

- The *Sefer Yetzirah* (5:2) associates the sense of hearing with the month of Av. How does listening relate to *sinat chinam* (gratuitous hatred), and how might it help to bring about *ahavat chinam* (gratuitous love)?
 - *Create it:* Cultivating *ahavat chinam*, especially towards people with whom we disagree or who may have wronged us, is not always easy; sometimes, it is a response that needs to begin with reason and eventually make its way to the emotions, and it takes practice. Try visualizing--either in your mind's eye or with an artistic medium--someone whom you do not love. Notice your immediate emotional reactions. Now, imagine hearing this person's parent, sibling, spouse, child, or friend describe them to you; how would you paint their portrait based on what you hear from their perspective? Notice your emotional response to this person after this exercise--how has it changed?
- Fire, symbolic of both hatred and love, has the power to transform what it touches, positively and negatively. How can fire--both literally and metaphorically understood-- bring about positive transformation in the short or long term?
 - *Create it:* Baking and cooking use fire to transform raw ingredients into something edible or more tasty. Choose a favorite dish that requires heat (ideally a visible flame) to make, and watch the cooking process closely. How does the fire transform the ingredients into the final product? What parallels can you draw between this process and how change works on a human and/or historical scale?

Rosh Chodesh Elul

[IMAGE (Shofar)]

“Sound the shofar on the new moon, when the moon starts to wax, for our festival day. For it is an ordinance in Israel, a rule of the God of Jacob.” (Psalms 81:4-5)

Commentary

The arrival of Elul ushers in a long season of reflection and repentance, which reaches its peak at Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and concludes at the end of Sukkot.

While we may often think of the shofar as the signature sound of Rosh Hashanah, it is also traditional to sound the shofar every day during the month of Elul (except for Shabbat). The shofar--a natural instrument made by hollowing out a horn, usually from a ram-- is one of the world's oldest instruments. Because it lacks keys or other means of modifying the pitch, the sound it produces is totally dependent upon the player's breath and embouchure. Though the range of playable notes is limited, this simple instrument is capable of stirring a wide range of human emotions with its primal, evocative cry: joy and anguish, fear and fury, longing and relief.

During the month of Elul and the High Holy Days, the urgent, piercing voice of the shofar is meant to go straight to our souls, to shake awake and open the deepest parts of ourselves, like a spiritual alarm clock. Its cry bypasses parts of us that are overly prone to intellectualizing and justifying, those that rely on words and material things to create the versions of ourselves that we present to the world; instead, it speaks directly to the core of who we are, asking God's first question to humanity, "*Ayekah*-- where are you?" (Genesis 3:9). Throughout the month of Elul, we ask ourselves where we are, where we want to go, and what we need to do in order to get there, as we do the important and challenging work of *teshuvah*, of turning inward in order to turn out better.

Reflections and Connections

- Elul is a month for introspection, and it is a wonderful time to incorporate a new spiritual practice into your routine. What are the circumstances in which you are most open to reflecting deeply and honestly? Which ritual, discipline, or pursuit would most encourage a disciplined practice of self-reflection or of working on an area for growth for you?
 - *Create it:* Reciting and reflecting on Psalm 27 is one traditional practice for this month. Try spending ten minutes each day of Elul reading one verse from this psalm and responding to it in the creative medium of your choice. Since there are fourteen verses, this allows you to go through the psalm twice over the course of the month. When you've finished, compare your different responses to the same verses. How are they different, and have you changed, over the course of this process?
- Listen to, or recall, the sound of the shofar, and list as many emotions as you can that it evokes from you. Can you find an equivalent sound or experience that matches each of these emotions? How are the effects similar or different to those produced by the shofar?
 - *Create it:* When the Israelites received revelation at Mt Sinai, “all the people saw the voices...the voice of the shofar” (Exodus 20:15). What would it look like to see the voice of the shofar?

Appendices

<u>Recipes</u>	<u>307</u>
<u>Tools and Tips</u>	<u>311</u>
<u>Interpretive Challah Shaping Toolbox</u>	<u>313</u>
<u>Bread Blessings</u>	<u>317</u>

Recipes

Essential Challah Recipe

(adapted from Deb Perelman)

2 1/4 teaspoons (1 packet — 1/4 ounce or 7 grams) active dry or instant yeast
 1/4 cup (85 grams) plus 1 teaspoon honey, or 1/3 cup plus 1 teaspoon sugar
 2/3 cup warm water (110 to 116 degrees F; it should feel warm, but not hot, on the inside of your wrist)
 1/3 cup (80 ml) olive, canola, or vegetable oil, plus more for the bowl
 2 large eggs (plus one for the egg wash)
 2 teaspoons flaky sea salt, or 1 1/2 teaspoons table salt
 4 cups (500 grams) all-purpose flour; ideally King Arthur or Gold Medal (for greater depth of flavor, substitute 1/2 cup of a whole grain flour for the all-purpose. Substitute up to half of the all-purpose with bread flour for a chewier texture); plus more for kneading

Make the dough:

Measure out the 2/3 cup warm water, and quickly (while it's warm), stir in 1 tsp honey or sugar and the packet of yeast until dissolved. For active dry yeast: allow to sit for 5-10 minutes, or until foamy on top (if it fails to foam, your yeast may be old—toss it and get some new yeast). Add 1/4 cup honey, 1/3 cup olive oil, and two eggs; mix this (I recommend a fork) until the egg yolks are broken up well. Add 3 1/2 cups of flour, followed by the salt. Mix with a spoon, your hands, or a stand mixer with a dough hook until it collects into a sticky uniform mass. Add the additional 1/2 cup flour if the dough is sticky.

Knead:

The dough will be a little sticky, don't get scared! With some flour on your hands, gather the dough together on a clean countertop or silicone baking mat. Using just enough extra flour so that the dough does not completely stick to your hands or surface, work the dough against the counter by pushing the dough with the heel of your hand in a long stroke away from you, then gathering it back into a ball and turning it ninety degrees, over and over, until the dough is no longer sticking to the counter or your hands, but is still soft. The dough is ready when it feels a bit like your earlobe when pinched, or when you can stretch it out thinly and see light through it before the dough breaks. Lightly oil your mixing bowl, put the ball of dough in it, and cover the top with plastic wrap. Set aside in a warm place for about 2 hours, or until doubled. [Recommended: you can also leave it to rise in the fridge overnight; just return it to room temperature an hour or two before shaping.]

Shape:

Take the dough out of the bowl, press the air out, and divide according to however many pieces you need. Shape as desired. Pro tip: if you're doing something complicated, make your shape on the parchment paper or silicone mat that you will bake it on; don't try to

transfer it from the countertop! When finished, cover loosely with plastic wrap and allow to rise again for 45 minutes.

Bake:

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees F. In a small bowl, beat an egg with a fork, and using a pastry brush, gently paint the challah with a thin, even layer of egg wash. Sprinkle with sesame or poppy seeds, flaky sea salt, etc, or leave plain. Baking time will vary based on your shape and oven temperature: check at 15 minutes and then every 5 after that until the outside is lightly browned (for a thin challah) or bronze (for a thick challah), and a skewer poked into the middle comes away clean [pro tip: get an instant-read meat thermometer; the challah is baked when the internal temp is 180 degrees F].

Variations:

Sephardic Pan de Calabaza (Pumpkin Challah):

Adapted from Maggie Glezer, *A Blessing of Bread*

Reduce oil to $\frac{1}{4}$ cup

Reduce to 1 egg

Add $\frac{1}{2}$ cup pumpkin or sweet potato puree

Add $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp ground cardamom

Add $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp ground ginger

Add $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp ground cinnamon

Bittersweet Chocolate Challah

Increase honey to $\frac{1}{3}$ cup or sugar to $\frac{1}{2}$ cup

Add $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of cocoa powder, sifted, along with the flour

Optional: knead in 1 cup of chocolate chips

Vegan (Eggless) Challah Recipe

Adapted from Challah Hub

1 cup warm water

1 packet (2 $\frac{1}{4}$ tsp) active dry or instant yeast

$\frac{1}{3}$ cup oil

2 tsp baking powder

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup sugar

1 $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp salt

4 cups flour, plus more for kneading

Make the dough:

Dissolve the yeast into the warm water with a pinch of sugar; allow to sit 5 minutes or until foamy (for active dry yeast). Add oil and baking powder, stir. Add sugar, flour, salt, and knead until smooth, adding more flour if needed. Continue with procedures for Essential Challah Recipe, above.

Homemade Matzah

Yield: 4 pieces

Note: Most home kitchens are not able to produce matzah that adheres to the strict kosher-for-Passover standards of store-bought varieties. If this is a concern for you, making matzah at home is still a fun and instructive way to put yourself in the shoes of the Israelites fleeing from Egypt in a hurry; just maybe don't use it for the seder.

These instructions are for Ashkenazi-style matzah, which is more cracker-like; for Sephardi or Mizrahi soft matzah, which is more like biblical matzah, you can roll the dough less thinly. Allow more time for baking to ensure that it cooks through.

Ingredients

1 cup wheat flour*

$\frac{1}{3}$ cup water

Pinch of salt (optional, for flavor; traditional matzah is not made with salt)

*To be kosher for Passover, ideally you would mill the grain yourself to ensure no possible contact with moisture; you could also buy this *shemurah*, or “guarded” flour from a matzah bakery.

Preparation

Before you begin, preheat your oven to 500 degrees F or as hot as it can go. The oven must be very hot before you start making the matzah.

Have ready: a very clean countertop, a rolling pin, two forks, a baking sheet, a timer. Tongs and a dough scraper are helpful but optional.

The entire process of making matzah— from when the water and flour meet to when the matzah comes out of the oven fully-baked— must be completed within 18 minutes, the time that the rabbis established as the point at which grain can begin the fermentation process. You will need to work quickly! Set your timer for 16 minutes to leave yourself two minutes of wiggle room for further baking.

Procedure

Add most of the water to the flour (and salt, if using), holding a few teaspoons back. Start the timer.

Mix the flour and water with a fork until it holds together, then turn it onto the countertop and start kneading. Add more water if it is crumbly at this point, add a little more flour if it sticks to the countertop. Knead quickly until smooth, about 2 minutes.

Divide dough into four pieces. Roll out each piece as thinly as possible without tearing it, turning or flipping the dough between rolls to ensure that it isn't sticking; any shape is fine. After rolling all four pieces, return to the first and reroll each piece once if time allows.

*If you have time and wish to cut or shape the matzah, do that now.

Using forks, forcefully poke holes all over each piece of dough, then flip them over and repeat the process. This is to prevent rising and large bubbles.

Put each piece of matzah on the baking sheet and put it in the oven. After 3-4 minutes, check the color; it should be lightly browned (not burnt) in spots and hopefully crispy. If it isn't, and you have time left, flip the matzah over with the tongs and continue baking until done or until the total 18 minutes have passed.

Tools and Tips

Tools for Challah Baking and Shaping

Essentials:

- A large bowl
- Measuring cups and spoons (make sure you use a dry measuring cup for flour!)
- Baking sheet
- Parchment paper
- Pastry brush
- Saran wrap or a clean, smooth dishcloth, for covering dough

Next level:

- Silicone baking mat and/or counter mat—reusable and a perfect surface for shaping.
- Instant-read thermometer— best way to make sure challah is fully baked.
- Food scale— measuring by weight is faster and more accurate.
- Bench scraper— helpful for dividing dough.
- Kitchen shears— for making epi and other shapes.
- Rolling pin— best for creating filled strands.
- Small paintbrushes (food-safe)— for creating colored egg wash designs.

Troubleshooting

Bread is a living creative partner, and sometimes it does not turn out exactly as expected. There are many variables in breadmaking, and it is not always possible to know why a challah may not have gone according to plan. These are a few explanations and suggested modifications for commonly asked troubleshooting questions:

Q: Why is my challah dough so dry and hard to work with?

A1: You may not be measuring your flour correctly. Make sure that each cup of flour is prepared this way: fluff up the flour in the bag with a spoon, scoop the fluffed flour into a dry measuring cup (not a liquid measuring cup, there is a big difference!) until it over-fills the cup, and level off the top with a flat surface. Do not pack the flour or tap the cup against the counter.

A2: You might be working in a very dry environment. Start with less flour than the recipe calls for (for my basic recipe, start with 3 cups), and work your way up until the dough is tacky but not sticky. It should not be totally dry when you are kneading it, just not so sticky that it clings to your work surface and your hands.

A3: If you're still in the early kneading stage, wet your hands with a little water and keep kneading, see if this helps. Don't add water directly to the dough.

Q: Help! The dough is sticking to everything like some kind of slime creature!

A1: Scrape your hands clean, wash and dry them, then put some flour on your hands before you touch the dough any more. You can add more flour until the dough is workable; just go slowly— no more than ¼ cup at a time— until the dough is tacky but no longer sticky.

Q: My dough isn't rising at all.

A1: It's possible that your yeast was dead, or that the water used to re-activate active dry yeast was too hot. You may want to start again with new yeast.

A2: It might be really cold in your space. Try putting the covered bowl of dough inside your oven (don't turn the oven on!) with a pot of boiling water and allowing it to rise for an hour or two. If this doesn't work, see A1.

Q: I'm trying to shape my dough and it's really tough, it won't take a new shape.

A1: Dough doesn't like to be reworked after it has gone through its rises; if you tried making a shape, then balled up the dough and tried to shape it again, it will resist you. Let it rest, covered, for 15 minutes, then try again.

A2: If your dough is also very dry, see the first question.

A3: If you're trying to roll out long strands and they are springing back to shorter lengths or starting to rip, stop rolling, let the strand sit for three minutes, and then try again.

Q: My baked challah has pulls or rips in it.

A1: The dough might not have been kneaded enough.

A2: The strands may have stuck together when they were braided or shaped; try lightly brushing them with flour before shaping next time.

A3: The last rise might have been rushed; let the bread double in size before putting it in the oven.

A4: Too much yeast, or using a high-powered yeast, could also cause this.

Q: My bread came out very dense.

A1: Make sure to let the bread double in size after shaping it and before baking; this could take up to an hour.

A2: Did you use too much flour? See the first question.

Interpretive Challah Shaping Toolbox

A Basic Primer of Dough Shapes

Strand (thin or thick)

To make a thin strand: Take a small piece of dough (the size of an egg, or smaller), and roll it back and forth against the table using your palms, working from the center of the dough outward to the ends. Apply more or less pressure in areas as needed to get a strand of uniform thickness and desired length.

To make a thicker strand: start by flattening your piece of dough against the table, using your hands or a rolling pin, to make a rough rectangle. Starting at the top of your rectangle, fold the top third of the dough over the rest of the rectangle; this will look like an envelope. Press down along this fold to push out any air bubbles. Take this whole folded section and fold it down over the rectangle again, pressing out the air with the heels of your palms. Continue until you reach the bottom of the rectangle, then roll this rectangular log back and forth as you would with a thin strand, until the seam is smoothed out and the strand is the desired size. Apply slightly more pressure to the ends of the strand for a tapered effect.

Spiral

Begin with a strand. Starting on one end, gently roll the end of the strand towards the rest of the strand, forming a tiny loop. Pick up the other end of the strand and wrap this around the loop; keep this loose, or your flat spiral may turn into a tower. Once you have used up the strand, tuck the end under the spiral. You can also make a double spiral by rolling the two ends toward the center simultaneously, one going along the top of the strand, and the other going along the bottom.

Round Bun

Take a palm-sized piece of dough and flatten it into a squarish shape. Gather the four corners and press them hard into the center of the circle. Do the same with the new corners that result. Flip this over. Cup your hand, and using your palm for pressure and your fingers to keep the dough under your palm, roll the ball against the table to smooth out the seam on the bottom. Nudge this back into the shape of a ball if it gets a little flat during this process.

Three-Strand Braid

Make three strands of equal length and thickness. Lay them parallel to each other on the table, and gently gather the tops of the strands together. Repeat the following pattern until you reach the end of the strands:

Move the furthest right strand → center (i.e., jump over the strand to its left)

Furthest left → center (i.e., jump over the strand to its right)

Try to keep an even tension, not pulling too tightly, as you braid. Once you reach the end of the strands, pinch the ends together, and gently tuck them under the rest of the braid.

Four-Strand Woven Braid

Make three strands of equal length and thickness. Lay them parallel to each other on the table, and gently gather the tops of the strands together. Repeat the following pattern until you reach the end of the strands; you will always be starting with the strand furthest to the right, and it will always end up becoming the furthest strand on the left:

Pick up the rightmost strand, and moving from right to left, jump over one, under one, over one.

Six-Strand Woven Braid

This follows the same form as the four-strand woven braid, but uses six strands. The pattern is:

Pick up the rightmost strand, and moving from right to left, jump over two, under one, over two.

Epi (wheat stalk/vine)

Begin with a strand. Using a pair of kitchen scissors held at a 30 degree angle to the strand, make deep cuts into the dough—almost, but not quite all the way through—at regular intervals, depending on the size you want the ‘leaves’ of your vine to be. After each cut, move the resulting ‘leaf’ to alternating sides of the imaginary center line. Experiment with different scissor angles and intervals between cuts. Be sure to place the strand that you will be cutting for your epi exactly where you want it on the baking sheet before you start to cut; it is very difficult to move the strand once the cuts are made.

Flavor

The beauty of working with challah as an interpretive medium is that you can build your midrash visually and flavorfully as well. Flavor can be incorporated at different stages of the challah process, and in many cases, these ingredients have the added bonus of adding beautiful, natural colors to your challah.

If you know from the beginning that you want to make flavor a primary element of your midrash, you may want to start with a recipe that brings flavor into your dough prominently. Some ingredients, like pumpkin or cocoa powder, must be added to the dough in the mixing stage; make sure you are using a recipe that calls for these additions, or that you are at a stage of challah expertise that you can make recipe modifications successfully. Solid dry mix-ins, such as chocolate chips, dried fruit, spices, citrus zest, chopped herbs, and the like can be incorporated once the dough has been kneaded most of the way through, if you want them to be suffused throughout the dough.

Fillings can also be added as part of the shaping process; this is a way to add jam, cheese, pesto, spices, marzipan, cinnamon sugar, nutella, or anything that is not especially wet and that would not taste strangely if you baked it. Unlike ingredients that are incorporated during kneading and distributed throughout the dough, fillings will usually stay enclosed within the dough, giving the finished shape a smooth appearance and creating distinct swirls of filling, flavor, and color when the bread is cut. To create filled strands: roll out the amount of dough you need for a log into a thin rectangle, spread on a thin layer of filling (leave a one-inch border around the sides), roll it up like a cinnamon roll, seal the edges, and use this strand as you would normally.

Spices and seeds are a great way to incorporate extra flavor and color at the end of the shaping process. After applying a light coating of egg wash to a challah ready for baking, sprinkle away! I like to use paprika, za'atar, poppy, and sesame seeds.

Color

Natural and subtle color can be added flavorfully using spices and other ingredients, as discussed above. If you really want some bold color in your challah, food coloring or specialty ingredients are necessary.

If you want your challah strands to be fully suffused with color, you will need to plan ahead. As you are mixing the dough, right before you are ready to knead, divide the dough into portions based upon how many colors you need and how much you want of each. Add food coloring a few drops at a time and proceed with kneading. Gel colors are best, as these add color quickly and without increasing the liquid in the dough as much; have extra flour on hand when working with food coloring in case things get a little sticky. Let each of these portions rise in their own bowls, then proceed normally.

The dough can also be dyed using natural ingredients, though usually these will not have quite the same look as those produced with dyes, and they may involve some experimentation to get the right saturation of color without impacting the texture. It is possible to purchase natural food dye powders, or naturally colored flour for baking from specialty stores. Some colors can be added through powders and spices: turmeric or saffron (small amount dissolved in the water) makes yellow, matcha powder makes green, freeze dried raspberry powder makes pink, paprika makes orange, purple potato powder or freeze dried blueberry powder makes purple. Other colors may need to be added as liquids; in these cases, the water in the challah recipe should be replaced with a juice or infusion, and it is best to use an eggless recipe, as the egg yolks will alter the color. Red can be made with beetroot juice, orange with carrot juice, blue with steeped butterfly pea flowers. Remember that these ingredients all impart some flavor as well.

Color can be added at the very end of the process by creating egg wash paints. Separate an egg into its yolk and white; you can further divide the yolk, or separate more eggs, in order to make the number of paints you require. Add a bit of food coloring to the yolks, and keep the whites to paint over any areas that you do not wish to have another color. Do not egg wash the challah before baking; bake the challah until it has only ten minutes left on its total baking time. Remove the challah from the oven, and taking care not to burn yourself, use a clean paintbrush to apply the egg wash paint. Return the challah to the oven for ten more minutes to set the egg wash.

Bread Blessings

Hafrashat Challah: Separating Challah

Why do we call the Shabbat bread “challah?” One explanation for this name comes from the *mitzvah* (commandment) associated with its creation. The “challah” is an olive-sized portion of the dough that is separated before the bread is shaped, and set aside as a symbolic offering.

Numbers 15:17-21

וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: דַּבֵּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם בְּבֹאֲכֶם אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מְבִיא אֲתֶכֶם שָׁמָּה: וְהָיָה בְּאֹכְלֶכֶם מִלֶּחֶם הָאָרֶץ תִּרְיִמוּ תְרוּמָה לַיהוָה: רִאשִׁית עֲרֹסְתֵיכֶם חֻלָּה תִּרְיִמוּ תְרוּמָה כְּתֻרֹמֶת גֶּרֶן כֵּן תִּרְיִמוּ אֹתָהּ: מִרִאשִׁית עֲרֹסְתֵיכֶם תִּתְּנוּ לַיהוָה תְרוּמָה לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם:

The Eternal spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: When you enter the land to which I am taking you and you eat of the bread of the land, you shall offer an offering to the Eternal: as the first yield of your baking, you shall offer a *challah* as an offering; you shall offer it as an offering like the offering from the threshing floor. You shall make an offering to the Eternal from the first yield of your baking, throughout the ages.

Challah is only separated from dough made with 2lbs 11oz of flour or more, where the liquid content of the dough is mostly water. For dough made with 3lbs 11oz of flour or more, challah is separated with a blessing. The separated portion can be burned or double-wrapped and discarded.

Hafrashat challah is considered a deeply spiritual moment, and will often be performed with a particular intention in mind, such as a prayer for healing. Personally, I find that *hafrashat challah* offers a meaningful moment to reflect on how the work of my hands always relies on additional factors outside of my control, and to offer gratitude for the many blessings in my life. In order to have enough dough to perform this *mitzvah*, some people gather together with others to bake challah together. As long as all of the dough is touching, it is considered to be one giant batch of dough for the purpose of the blessing. Each person should remove a pinch of their dough.

To perform *hafrashat challah*, uncover the dough and recite the blessing:

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ לְהַפְרִישׁ חֻלָּה

Baruch atah Adonai Eloheinu melech ha'olam asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu l'hafreesh challah.

Blessed are You, Eternal our God, Sovereign of the Universe, who sanctified us with commandments and commanded us to separate challah.

Then, remove an olive-sized piece from the dough. Hold the piece in the air and recite:

הָרִי זוֹ חֻלָּה.

Harei zu challah.

Behold, this is challah.

Wrap the dough in foil and burn it in the oven, or wrap it twice in foil or saran and discard it.

Blessing for Ritually Washing the Hands Before Eating Bread (*Nitilat Yadayim*)

Pour water from a cup twice over your dominant hand, then twice over your non-dominant hand. Recite the blessing and dry your hands fully.

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ עַל נְטִילַת יָדַיִם.

Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech ha-olam, asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav vitzivanu al n'tilat yadayim.

Blessed are You, Eternal our God, Sovereign of the universe, who has sanctified us with Your commandments, and commanded us concerning the washing of the hands.

Blessing Over Bread (*HaMotzi*)

If the bread is covered for Shabbat or a holiday, remove the cover, and touch or lift up the bread. Recite the blessing, sprinkle with salt according to your custom, and tear or cut the bread to distribute it.

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם הַמּוֹצִיא לֶחֶם מִן הָאָרֶץ.

Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha'olam, hamotzi lechem min ha'aretz.

Blessed are you, Eternal our God, Sovereign of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth.

Blessing After a Meal Including Bread (abridged *Birkat HaMazon*)

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, הַזֵּן אֶת־הָעוֹלָם כָּלֹו בְּטוֹבוֹ בָּחֵן בְּחֶסֶד וּבְרַחֲמִים, הוּא נוֹתֵן לֶחֶם לְכָל־בֶּשָׂר פִּי לְעוֹלָם חֶסֶד. וּבְטוֹבוֹ הַגָּדוֹל תָּמִיד לֹא חָסַר לָנוּ, וְאֵל יַחֲסֹר לָנוּ מִזֶּן לְעוֹלָם וָעֵד. בַּעֲבוּר שְׁמוֹ הַגָּדוֹל, כִּי הוּא אֵל זָן וּמַפְרִיֵּס לְכָל־מַטִּיב לְכָל־מְזִין לְכָל־בְּרִיּוֹתָיו אֲשֶׁר בָּרָא. בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי הַזֵּן אֶת־הַכֹּל.

Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech haolam, hazan et haolam kulo b'tuvo, b'chein b'chesed uv'rachamim. Hu notein lechem l'chol basar ki l'olam chasdo. Uv'tuvo hagadol tamid lo

chasar lanu, v'al yechsar lanu, mazon l'olam va-ed, baavur sh'mo hagadol. Ki hu El zan um'farneis lakol umeitiv lakol, umeichin mazon l'chol b'riyotav asher bara. Baruch atah Adonai, hazan et hakol.

Sovereign God of the universe, we praise You: Your goodness sustains the world. You are the God of grace, love, and compassion, the Source of bread for all who live; for Your love is everlasting. In Your great goodness we need never lack for food; You provide food enough for all. We praise You, O God, Source of food for all who live.

כַּכְתוּב, וְאָכַלְתָּ וְשָׂבַעְתָּ, וּבִרְכַּתְּ אֶת־יְיָהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ עַל הָאָרֶץ הַטֹּבָה אֲשֶׁר נָתַן לָךְ. בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, עַל הָאָרֶץ וְעַל הַמָּזוֹן.

Kakativ: v'achalta v'savata, uveirachta et Adonai Elohecha al haaretz hatovah asher natan lach. Baruch atah Adonai, al haaretz v'al hamazon.

As it is written: When you have eaten and are satisfied, give praise to your God who has given you this good earth. We praise You, O God, for the earth and for its sustenance.

וּבִנְהָ יְרוּשָׁלַיִם עִיר הַקֹּדֶשׁ בְּמַהֲרָה בְּיָמֵינוּ. בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, בּוֹנֵה בְרַחֲמָיו יְרוּשָׁלַיִם. אָמֵן.

Uv'neih Y'rushalayim ir hakodesh bimheirah v'yameinu. Baruch atah Adonai, boneh v'rachamav Y'rushalayim. Amen.

Let Jerusalem, the holy city, be renewed in our time. We praise You, Adonai, in compassion You rebuild Jerusalem. Amen.

הַרְחֵמֵנוּ, הוּא יִמְלֹךְ עָלֵינוּ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד.
הַרְחֵמֵנוּ, הוּא יִתְבָּרֵךְ בְּשָׁמַיִם וּבָאָרֶץ.
הַרְחֵמֵנוּ, הוּא יִשְׁלַח בְּרָכָה מִרְבָּה בְּבֵית הַזֶּה, וְעַל שִׁלְחָן זֶה שְׂאֻכְלָנוּ עָלָיו.
הַרְחֵמֵנוּ, הוּא יִשְׁלַח לָנוּ אֶת אֱלֹהֵינוּ הַנָּבִיא זְכוּר לְטוֹב, וַיְבַשֵּׁר לָנוּ בְּשׂוֹרוֹת טוֹבוֹת יְשׁוּעוֹת וְנִחָמוֹת.
(Shabbat) הַרְחֵמֵנוּ, הוּא יַנְחִילָנוּ יוֹם שְׁכֵלֹו שְׁבַת וּמְנוּחָה לְחַיֵּי הָעוֹלָמִים.

HaRachaman, hu yimloch aleinu l'olam va-ed.

HaRachaman, hu yitbarach bashamayim uvaaretz.

HaRachaman, hu yishlach b'rachah m'rubah babayit hazeh, v'al shulchan zeh she-achalnu alav.

HaRachaman, hu yishlach lanu et Eliyahu HaNavi, zachur latov, vivaser lanu b'sorot tovat, y'shuot v'nechamot.

(Shabbat) HaRachaman, hu yanchileinu yom shekulo Shabbat um'nuchah l'chayei haolamim.

Merciful One, be our God forever.

Merciful One, heaven and earth alike are blessed by Your presence.

Merciful One, bless this house,
this table at which we have eaten.

Merciful One, send us tidings of Elijah,
glimpses of good to come, redemption and consolation.

(Shabbat) Merciful One, help us to see the coming of a time when all is Shabbat.

עֲשֵׂה שְׁלוֹם בְּמִרְמָיו, הוּא יַעֲשֶׂה שְׁלוֹם, עָלֵינוּ וְעַל כָּל־יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְאָמְרוּ: אָמֵן. יְהוָה עֵז לְעַמּוֹ יִתֵּן, יְהוָה יְבָרֵךְ אֶת־עַמּוֹ
בְּשָׁלוֹם.

Oseh shalom bimromav, hu yaaseh shalom, aleinu v'al kol Yisrael, v'imru amen.

Adonai oz l'amo yitein, Adonai y'vareich et amo vashalom.

May the Source of peace grant peace to us, to all Israel, and to all the world. Amen. May the
Eternal grant strength to our people. May the Eternal bless our people with peace.

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