

**Enduring Understandings:
A Portion-by-Portion Torah Study of Life Lessons from Genesis**

Amy T. Ross

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Referee: Dr. David Weisberg

Dedicated to

Justin A. Ross



*My husband, my best friend.
The one I laugh with, live for,
dream with, love.*

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Digest

Torah study is among the most important values in Jewish tradition, yet many lay people find the task to be difficult and daunting. *Enduring Understandings: A Portion-by-Portion Torah Study of Life Lessons from Genesis* concentrates on engaging Jewish lay people in the study of Torah both for its own sake and for the gleaning of relevant life lessons from selections within each of the *parshiot* of Genesis. This curriculum allows congregants to study Torah through the lens of the lessons it can provide for everyday life, and aims to make Torah study more accessible to congregations that lack professional resources by providing the tools for lay people to achieve their Torah study goals.

Introduction

In the Midrash, we are told that in his later years, Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai was once walking from Tiberias to Sepphoris. Rabbi Hiyya ben Abba walked with him to support him and steady him. They came to a beautiful country house and Rabbi Yohanan said, “This country house was mine and I sold it in order to acquire the Torah.” Some time later, they came to a prosperous vineyard and he said, “This vineyard was mine and I sold it in order to acquire the Torah.” When they came to a fine grove of olive trees, Rabbi Yohanan said, “This olive grove was mine and I sold it in order to acquire the Torah.”

At that point, Rabbi Hiyya began to weep. “Why are you weeping?” asked Rabbi Yohanan. “Look at the fine things you used to own,” Rabbi Hiyya replied. “You have sold them all and left nothing for your old age.”

Rabbi Yohanan stopped, faced Rabbi Hiyya, and put his hands on Hiyya’s shoulders. “Is that truly what you think? The truth is that I have sold things created in six days in order to acquire the Torah, which was given to Moses only after forty days and forty nights of studying with God. I have sold things that are worldly, which a person acquires but never truly owns, which a person must abandon when life is through. In return, I have acquired Torah, a possession shared by both heaven and earth, which a person truly owns once it is acquired, and which never departs from a person in old age or even in death. Inch by inch, and field by field, I have traded this life for a higher life.”¹

Though modern Judaism would never expect its adherents to give up their worldly possessions, this story is a shining example of the importance of Torah study in Jewish life. And it does not stand alone. Jewish texts are laden with statements, teachings, and stories relating to the importance of Torah study. The Talmud teaches that the study of Torah surpasses a number of other *mitzvot*, including honoring one’s parents, performing acts of *g’milut chasadim* (loving-kindness) and making

¹ Based on and taken from the retelling of Leviticus Rabbah 30:1 by Rabbi Seymour Rossel

peace among humans.² In the *Mishnah*, one who studies Torah for its own sake is said to bring joy to God and humanity alike and is considered to be righteous, pious, upright and faithful.³ In Proverbs, Torah is compared to a tree of life, bringing happiness and peace to those who uphold its teachings.⁴ Even our daily liturgy reminds us of the importance of the study of Torah. We are told in the *V'ahavta* that it is incumbent upon us as Jews to take Torah to heart, pass its teachings on to our children and allow it to permeate our daily lives.⁵

Yet, even with all of the emphasis in our tradition on the study of Torah and its potential impact on our lives, many lay people find the task to be difficult and cumbersome. And while several modern congregations are blessed to have the assistance of rabbis and educators who bring the lessons of Torah to life in weekly study sessions, adult education offerings and other venues, numerous other congregations do not have that luxury. In these congregations, it is up to lay leaders to bring the lessons of Torah to their fellow congregants, and though many seek to do just that, they may have trouble figuring out where to begin.

Resources do exist to help lay leaders in this endeavor. Nehama Leibowitz was a modern Torah scholar who devoted her life to engaging lay people in the study of Torah. The book *Teaching Torah* offers insights and activities related to each Torah portion. In *A Torah Commentary for Our Times*, Harvey J. Fields brings together teachings from ancient, medieval and modern commentators, offering one or more lessons on Jewish values from each *parasha*. Every Monday, the Union for Reform Judaism puts out an email entitled, "Reform Voices of Torah," through its weekly series, "Ten Minutes of Torah," offering *divrei Torah* (words of Torah) for each *parasha* from a Reform perspective. Yet even with these resources and many more available, lay leaders still have difficulty translating the plethora of available information into a succinct and meaningful Torah study session.

² *Shabbat* 127a

³ *Avot* 6:1

⁴ 3:18

⁵ Deuteronomy 6:6-7

Enduring Understandings: A Portion-by-Portion Torah Study of Life Lessons from Genesis brings together several sources of commentary on each *parasha*, providing user-friendly, step-by-step lesson plans designed to be led by lay leaders with any level of Torah knowledge. This curriculum concentrates on engaging lay people in the study of Torah both for its own sake and for the gleaning of relevant life lessons from selections within each of the *parashiot*. This curriculum helps participants to gain a greater understanding of the relevance of Torah in modern life, as well as the ability to employ the teachings of Judaism in everyday situations.

By bringing together life lessons from the *parashiot* in Genesis, sources from Jewish tradition and guiding questions, this curriculum enhances the sources already available to those interested in Torah study by providing comprehensive, easy-to-use lesson plans that can be led by any leader in any congregational setting. *Enduring Understandings: A Portion-by-Portion Torah Study of Life Lessons from Genesis* provides an avenue by which congregants study Torah through the lens of the lessons it can provide for everyday life, strengthening bonds to Judaism, community, tradition and, most importantly, Torah.

How to Use This Curriculum

Torah is filled with stories meant to teach us lessons about how to live an ethical and righteous life. Jewish tradition teaches, “*yesh shivim panim baTorah*,”⁶ or “there are seventy faces of Torah.” This maxim has been interpreted to mean that, for every word, every phrase, every verse we read in Torah, there are no less than seventy interpretations. With seventy interpretations to each word, phrase and verse, it is clear that the study of Torah is never ending and always relevant. For each situation we encounter, for each experience we have, Torah offers lessons that stand to help us make those decisions and take those actions that will, ultimately, allow us to grow into the best possible versions of ourselves.

Enduring Understandings: A Portion-by-Portion Torah Study of Life Lessons from Genesis offers one such interpretation, one such lesson, from each of the *parashiot* (portions) in the book of Genesis. As participants grapple with the stories, teachings and lessons in Torah, they will find that the words of Torah truly can speak to each individual and make a real difference in the life of the modern Jew. This curriculum provides a series of lessons, one for each portion in Genesis, the goal of each being to show participants the relevance of Torah and the lessons it teaches about daily life. The curriculum focuses on the book of *B’reishit*, a Hebrew word whose literal meaning is, “beginning.” This curriculum, then, is just the beginning of the study of Torah. In addition to teaching life lessons through the lens of the stories in the book of *B’reishit*, this curriculum seeks to provide an entry for students of Judaism to undertake the study of Torah as a whole. It is the hope of the author that students who engage with this curriculum will be motivated to continue the study of Torah throughout their lives, seeking to find each of the seventy meanings in each of the words, phrases and verses of Torah.

⁶ Numbers *Rabbah* 13:15

In addition to providing detailed, easy-to-use lesson plans for each of the *parashiot*, this curriculum provides a structure for the study of Torah that can be easily applied to any of the *parashiot* in Torah. Each lesson begins with a synopsis of the Torah portion in its entirety. The synopsis provides the context for the verses or story on which the lesson will, ultimately, focus. Leaders may choose to read the synopsis in its entirety to participants, or simply use it to familiarize themselves with the portion as a whole. The leader can also refer to the synopsis throughout the lesson to answer questions or provide additional information about the portion. Though several life lessons can be gleaned from each portion in Torah, the author has selected one piece of text from each portion on which to focus, referred to in the lessons as the “central text.” After the synopsis, the central text of the lesson is provided (the chapter and verses are listed in the lesson plan; the text itself appears at the top of each participant handout), as well as the essential questions that the lesson seeks to answer. A list of materials needed is also provided, so that the leader can prepare, in advance, for the needs of each lesson.

The session plan for each lesson is then detailed, beginning with an introduction that is meant to familiarize leader and participant alike with the content of the lesson, as well as any necessary background information. Each lesson begins with an opening activity that is designed to engage participants with the topic at hand, as well as connect the Torah portion to the everyday experiences of the participants. At this point in the session, the leader is asked to give each participant a copy of the corresponding participant handout, which contains the central text in its entirety, as well as the commentaries and quotations that will inform the remainder of the lesson. Following the opening activity, participants and leaders will read the central text and briefly discuss their reactions to the text. Guiding questions are provided for each text that will help to focus the discussion of the text on the topic at hand.

The next part of the lesson is divided into two or three sections, each of which seeks to further engage participants in a study and understanding of the central text. Each section is given an identifying title, which appears both in the participant handout and the lesson plan. In this way, using the given title, leaders will be able to refer easily to the sections in the participant handout. For each section in the participant handout, the lesson plan provides activities and guiding questions that seek to help participants understand and answer the essential questions. Each lesson culminates with a concluding activity, designed to reinforce the opening exercise and the study of the relevant texts (biblical and commentary) in a way that relates the lesson learned to the everyday life of the participants.

The sessions in this curriculum are designed to last for a total of ninety minutes. That said, each lesson can be easily modified to fit whatever time is available. Though the lessons follow a natural progression from one section to the next, in order to shorten lessons, leaders can choose to focus on one section of commentary only or choose one or more commentaries in each session and focus only on those. Leaders should feel free to modify the lessons not only for time constraints, but also to fit the needs of the group, whatever they may be. Modifications can also be made with regard to the materials needed for the lesson. For example, laptop computers may be used in the place of paper and pen (or pencil) and, if a board or flip-chart is not available, leaders may substitute paper and pen for these items.

Participant handouts contain direct quotations from biblical, rabbinic, medieval and modern sources. For biblical quotations, the 1987 Jewish Publication Society translation of the Bible is used. In a few cases, the author chose to modify the translation, indicated by bracketed words or phrases in the translation of the text. These modifications were made primarily for the purpose of consistency. It is necessary to point out here that the Hebrew language, unlike the English language, is gendered. That means that in Hebrew, the word “it” does not exist. So, in cases where the word

“it” may be called for, for example, in reference to God, the Jewish Publication Society uses the pronoun “he.” The decision not to alter the gendered pronouns in the translation is in no way reflective of any theological belief of the author; it is simply a reflection of the structure and grammar of the Hebrew language. Additionally, any Hebrew words that appear in the original version of the commentaries have been either translated or transliterated and translated for ease of use by participants who may not have mastery of the Hebrew language.

Commentators throughout the ages have used many different versions of the biblical text to inform their commentaries, so for the purpose of consistency, the author altered biblical translations to match that of the Jewish Publication Society. Within the commentaries in the participant handout, biblical verse quotations from the central text are printed in all capital letters, so that they may be easily identifiable. Any additional biblical verses are indicated by quotation marks. Bracketed material within a commentary indicates an addition or clarification made by either the translator of the commentary, the editor of the book in which the commentary appears or the author of the curriculum. For the purposes of this work, a distinction between comments of the translator, editor and author is not made. References for each commentary are provided so that leader or participant may easily find the quotation in its original form. Though commentators often use abbreviations within their commentaries, for ease of understanding, the author avoided the use of abbreviations. The exceptions to this rule are the use of the abbreviation “R,” which stands for “Rabbi,” and the use of the abbreviation, “b,” which stands for the Hebrew word, “*ben*,” meaning, “son of.” Talmudic references, either within the commentary or as direct quotations, come from the Babylonian Talmud (for more information on Talmud, refer to the “Glossary of Sources”).

Whenever possible, primary sources are used. Where primary sources are not readily available, secondary sources are listed. For ease of reference, titles of readily available books are used in citations. For a complete list of works cited, including authors, leader and participant may refer to

the bibliography. Leaders may find it helpful to have copies of the bibliography available for each participant, or at the very least, have one copy of the bibliography available at each session, so that participants can write down identifying information with which to look up quotations.

The lessons contained within this curriculum are meant to be used and studied. As such, it is the author's hope that leaders of Torah study sessions will make these lessons their own, modifying as the leader sees fit. The lessons contained within this curriculum, like the stories of Torah, are meant to be taught and shared, and passed down from generation to generation. It is the hope of the author that the lessons contained within this curriculum will enrich the minds and lives of participants who choose to engage in the study of Torah. Though we may never meet, it is the honor and pleasure of the author to study with each of you a few of the many faces of Torah.

פרשת בראשית

Parashat B'reishit

Genesis 1:1 – 6:8

Synopsis

Parashat B'reishit begins with the first of two descriptions of how God created heaven and earth. In this version, over the course of six days, God creates everything from the sun and moon to fish, birds and, finally, humans. On the seventh day, after the work of creation was complete, God rested. And God sanctified the seventh day for all time, making it a holy day and separating it from the rest of the days of the week.

The second version of the creation story follows immediately. In this version, God begins with the creation of a human, who is then placed in the Garden of Eden and put in charge of caring for the land. The human is instructed not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad, which is in the center of the garden, near the Tree of Life. God decides that the human should not remain alone and so creates various animals to keep the human company. When none of these animals seems a fitting companion for the human, God creates a second human. Adam and Eve become man and wife and live naked and innocent in the Garden of Eden.

Tempted by a snake, Eve eats from the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad and shares some with Adam. At once, they realize they are naked, and they hide from God. The snake, Adam and Eve are all punished for eating the fruit, and Adam and Eve are banished from the Garden of Eden.

A new generation comes into being with the birth of two sons, Cain and Abel. Each offers a sacrifice to God, but Cain's is not accepted. He becomes distressed by the matter and murders his brother, Abel. Cain is punished by God and becomes a wanderer of the earth. As ten new generations are born, God becomes disheartened with humanity's wickedness and seeks a way to remove them from the earth. Even so, a man named Noah was able to gain God's favor.

Central Text(s)

- Genesis, chapter 6, verses 5-7

Essential Questions

- What is anthropopathism (the ascription of human emotions to God) and how is it treated in tradition?
- Why is it important for Torah to tell us God's emotions with regard to God's desire to "blot out" humanity?
- What can we learn from God's emotion and thought processes?

Materials Needed

- Participant Handouts (one for each participant)
- Pens/pencils (one for each participant)
- Blank Paper (one for every two participants)

Session Plan**Introduction:**

Parashat B'reishit contains many widely known stories: the accounts of creation, Adam and Eve's fall from grace in the Garden of Eden, and Cain's murder of his brother Abel. It seems that almost as soon as humanity is created, we manage to take several large missteps. It is also well known that these missteps eventually lead to the flood and the destruction of the majority of humanity. What might not be common knowledge, but is equally important to the narrative of humanity, is that at the very end of this *parasha* (portion), we are offered a glimpse into God's emotions. This session will focus on that insight, its interpretation throughout the ages and what it means for us.

Opening Activity (10 minutes)

Welcome participants and, if they do not know each other, ask them to introduce themselves.

Ask participants to divide up into *chevruta* (small study groups). With their partner or partners, ask them to reflect on a time in their life when they felt regret. Discuss the following with participants:

- Remember a time when you felt regret. What is it that caused you to feel regret?
- Did you know at the time that you would come to feel regret?
- What does regret feel like for you?
- What did you do as a result of your feeling regret? Did your action make you feel better?

After a brief period for discussion, bring participants back together. Ask if anyone is interested in sharing their experience, and allow a few participants to do so. Once the sharing is complete, explain to the group that this week's Torah portion contains an instance in which God regrets, and we will spend this session studying that instance in detail.

Read the Text (10 minutes)

Give each participant a copy of the participant handout. Ask a member of the group to read Genesis, chapter 6, verses 5-7, aloud and then summarize it for the group. Discuss the following with participants:

- What is your initial reaction to the text? What strikes you about this text?
- Can you identify with the feelings attributed to God in this text?
- How does this text make you feel?

Participants will likely give a myriad of answers. It is important to highlight the following two points during this discussion:

- This text ascribes emotion to God. We are told that God feels regret and sadness, two very human emotions.
- Even though God is ready to “blot out” all of humanity, God is still “saddened.” This is an interesting conflict in God's emotional state.

Tell the participants that we will be focusing on these two points. We will utilize the richness of Jewish tradition to help us look at these issues in depth.

God Feels Human Emotions (30 minutes)

Direct participants to the section in the participant handout entitled, “God Feels Human Emotions.” Explain to the participants that Judaism has long had a tension between the accessibility of God, meaning the ability of humans to relate to and understand God, and the ascription of emotions or human characteristics to God. Ascribing human characteristics (physical or emotional) to God is both problematic and helpful. It is problematic in that it creates a certain picture of God that contradicts the idea that God is beyond the limits of human understanding. On the other hand, ascribing human characteristics to God allows us, as humans, to better understand and perhaps even identify with God. As you will see in the following text selections, scholars are careful to remind us of these tensions, as well as to promote their own viewpoints.

Ask participants to take a moment to read the texts from this section silently. As they read, ask them to jot down any reactions they have to the texts. When all participants have completed their reading, take each text in turn and ask participants to share their reactions. Additionally, focus on the following guide questions for each text:

- Ramban (“The Torah speaks...”)
 - If Torah is “the language of men,” what do you suppose is the language of God?
- Kimchi (“The expression...”)
 - Why might Kimchi say that it important for us to know God’s feelings? Do you agree? Why or why not? *(Perhaps it is important to know God’s feelings here so that we know that God was conflicted and/or upset about God’s decision. We can take comfort in the fact that although God was prepared to destroy humanity, God was conflicted.)*

- Why would Kimchi say that “emotions such as ‘regret’ are not part of God’s vocabulary”? *(Because that would indicate that God has the ability to make mistakes, which according to traditional theology, is not possible.)*
- What emotions do you feel are a part of God’s vocabulary?
- Sarna (“This is an anthropopathism...”)
- Sarna talks about a striking tension in the biblical text (God is apart from this world and also an integral part of it). How is that apparent in our verse? *(Assuming God really is all-knowing and all-powerful, why would the Torah bother to spend time justifying God’s actions and talking about God’s feelings regarding those actions? It is important for us to be able to identify with the story and its characters so that we can draw meaning from it.)*
- Cassuto (“As a rule...”)
- Cassuto makes a distinction between intellectuals and the entire people. For him, the discussion regarding the ascription of human characteristics to God is unimportant for the “entire people.” It is only relevant to an intellectual’s deeper study of Torah. Do you agree? Why or why not?
- Kimchi (“This too, is a figure...”)
- Kimchi suggests that Torah does not really tell us what God was thinking or feeling, but rather that Torah describes what the teller of the story (Moses) *assumed* God was thinking and feeling. Do you agree with this assessment? Why or why not?
- How is Kimchi’s view different from that of the other commentators? *(Kimchi is of the opinion that the author – or teller of the story – adds in the emotions and thoughts he thinks God might have, almost as editorial notes. The other commentators truly believe*

that God had thoughts or feelings similar to this and express the need to describe them in these terms so that humans can understand them.)

- Though there are instances in Torah where we are told what God might be “thinking” or “feeling,” by and large, Torah leaves the emotions of the human characters out of the telling of the story. This omission of human emotions is really a beautiful thing because it allows us, as readers, to think deeply about the characters and put our own emotions into the text. Why do you think the Torah expounds here on God’s “feelings” and not on humans’ feelings? How do you think Noah feels about the flood? If those who will ultimately perish in the flood were aware of God’s plan, how do you think they would feel?

Remind participants that although we will never know for sure what – or even if – God thinks or feels, we need this information in order to understand and identify with the story. If the text simply said, “God destroyed the world,” and gave no justification or emotional consequence, it would hardly be meaningful in our lives. By sharing the justification and emotional conflict in a way that we can understand, we are able to relate the story to our own lives and hopefully even learn from it.

God’s Emotional Conflict (30 minutes)

Direct participants to the section in the participant handout entitled, “God’s Emotional Conflict.” Remind participants that in Genesis 6:6, we learn that God regrets having made man and that God is sad (presumably about the fact that God plans to “blot out” humanity from the earth, which we learn in verse 7). Primarily, the commentaries to this section focus on two points. First, what might have happened differently during creation to prevent the downfall of humanity? In fact, Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai (two famous rabbis and their students) are said to have debated for two and a half years as to whether or not humans should have even been created in the first place (Eruvin, 13b). (By the way, it was decided that humanity should not have been created, but since we were,

we should live our lives righteously and piously.) The second point is God's regret and sorrow. The idea that God might have such emotions is novel, so the commentators spend a lot of time speculating.

Ask participants to rejoin their *chevruta* from the opening activity, and give each group a piece of blank paper. Instruct participants to read the texts in this section and discuss their initial reactions with each other. Then ask them to go back and read the texts again, more thoroughly this time. Ask them to pretend that they can observe what is happening in God's "mind." Using the biblical text and the commentaries in this section, ask them to create a "timeline" of God's thought process from the beginning of verse 5 to the end of verse 7. Be as creative as possible! For example:

1. God sees that humans are wicked through and through and realizes that the blame can only lay with God, as the Creator of humans. So, God regrets having made humans in the first place.
2. Since God cannot un-create humans, God is at least relieved that God separated humans from celestial beings, because otherwise there might be a much bigger problem.
3. God realizes that none of this would have happened if God hadn't given humans an evil inclination. God regrets having given humanity that trait as it seems to have backfired.
4. God is sad about the fact that God's creation did not live up to God's expectations and so God decides to destroy humans, and animals along with them, in order to solve the problem.
5. God takes time to grieve for God's creation. (God sits *shivah*!)
6. God decides to give humanity time to change and repent. When humanity does not, God goes back to God's plan of blotting out humanity.

Once participants have had time to create their "timelines," ask each *chevruta* to share with the group. After everyone has shared, do a little comparing and contrasting of the timelines. How similar are the timelines? What did some put in and others leave out?

Concluding Activity (10 minutes)

It is clear from the previous activity that there is an internal process that leads God from God's observation about humanity to the feelings of regret and sadness and, finally, to action. As humans, we go through similar processes when we react to situations and experiences. For us, these internal processes happen so quickly that we sometimes do not even realize they have happened.

Still with their *chevruta*, ask participants to think back to the first activity and the example they gave of a time in their own lives when they experienced regret. Ask them to discuss the following:

- What process did you follow as you moved from the experience to regret and possibly to action? Were you conscious of that process at the time? Will you be more aware of it in the future?
- How can what you learned about God's regret and sadness inform these emotions in your own life?
- Why is it important to understand where feelings of regret and sadness are coming from?

Thank participants for coming and remind them that understanding their emotions and the processes involved with them can help them to react in healthy and helpful ways. Though it may be hard to do this in the moment of emotion, it is an important exercise of self-reflection and can help us to be better friends, parents, siblings, children and even better people.

פרשת בראשית

Parashat B'reishit

Participant Handout

Genesis, Chapter 6, Verses 5-7

⁵ The LORD saw how great was man's wickedness on earth, and how every plan devised by his mind was nothing but evil all the time. ⁶ And the LORD regretted that He had made man on earth, and His heart was saddened. ⁷ The LORD said, "I will blot out from the earth the men whom I created -- men together with beasts, creeping things, and birds of the sky; for I regret that I made them."

God Feels Human Emotions

The Torah speaks in the language of men.

Ramban on Gen. 6:6

AND THE LORD REGRETTED. The expression...has been chosen by the Torah in order of human beings to have at least an inkling of what God's feelings were when He faced destroying His handiwork. Clearly, such emotions as "regret" are not part of God's vocabulary.

Kimchi on Gen. 6:6

REGRETTED...SADDENED. This is an anthropopathism, or the ascription to God of human emotions, a frequent feature of the biblical narrative. The need for such usage arises from the inherent tension between God's transcendence and His immanence. On the one hand, He is conceived to be wholly outside of nature, omniscient and omnipotent, sovereign over time and space, and not subject to change. On the other hand, He is also immanent in the world, not withdrawn from it, a personal God who is actively involved in the lives of His creatures, approachable by them, and responsive to their needs.

Sarna on Gen. 6:6

As a rule the commentators dwell at length on the problems connected with the anthropopathic expressions in this verse...and it is superfluous to discuss them, if one's aim is purely to understand the Torah text. The Torah was not intended specifically for intellectuals but for the entire people, which is not concerned with philosophic or theological speculations. It uses ordinary language, plainly and without sophistication, and pays no heed to the inferences that later readers, who are accustomed to ways of thinking wholly alien to the Bible, may draw from its words.

Cassuto on Gen. 6:6

AND HIS HEART WAS SADDENED. This too, is a figure of speech, seeing that God does not know such emotional ups and downs as joy and sadness...In other words, the Torah, in **telling** us about God's reactions, here and elsewhere, reflects the impressions gained by the teller of the story.

Kimchi on Gen. 6:6

God's Emotional Conflict

SADDENED. God's decision is made in sorrow not in anger.

Sarna on Gen. 6:6

AND THE LORD REGRETTED THAT HE HAD MADE MAN ON EARTH. R. Nehemiah interpreted it: I am comforted (menuham) that I created him below, for had I created him above, he would have incited the celestial creatures to revolt, just as he has incited the terrestrial beings to revolt. R. Aibu interpreted: It was a regrettable error on My part to have created an evil urge within him, for had I not created an evil urge within him, he would not have rebelled against Me.

Genesis *Rabbah* 27:4

For a time God, in His long-suffering kindness, passed by the iniquities of men, but His forbearance ceased when once they began to lead unchaste lives, for "God is patient with all sins save only an immoral life." Even after God had resolved upon the destruction of the sinners, He still permitted His mercy to prevail, in that He sent Noah unto them, who exhorted them for one hundred and twenty years to amend their ways, always holding the flood over them as a threat. As for them, they but derided him. Partly they persisted in their obduracy of heart because Noah had made known to them that the flood would not descend so long as the pious Methuselah sojourned among them. The period of one hundred and twenty years which God had appointed as the term of their probation having expired, Methuselah died, but out of regard for the memory of this pious man God gave them another week's respite, the week of mourning for him. To the sinners God gave the dainties that await man in the future world, for the purpose of showing them what they were forfeiting. But all this proved unavailing, and, Methuselah and the other pious men of the generation having departed this life, God brought the deluge upon the earth.

The Legends of the Jews, "The Generation of the Deluge"

Before He brought on the flood, God Himself kept seven days of mourning, for He was grieved at heart.

Tanhuma, Parashat Shemini, as quoted in *A Rabbinic Anthology*, p. 57

פרשת נח

Parashat Noah

Genesis 6:9 – 11:32

Synopsis

At the beginning of *parashat Noah*, God, seeing how corrupt humanity is, decides to send a flood to destroy them. Only Noah, a righteous and blameless man, is told of God's plan, and he is instructed to build an ark so that he can survive the flood. Noah builds the ark according to God's specifications and he, along with his wife, their three sons and their wives, boards the ark. Noah brings along one male and one female of each kind of animal, with the exception of the clean animals, of which he brings seven pairs.

God causes it to rain for forty days and forty nights, flooding the earth. After one hundred and fifty days, God sends a wind to the earth and the flood waters subside. Eventually, the ark comes to rest on Mount Ararat and Noah sends out a raven and a dove to search for dry land. When both return to the ark, he waits seven days and sends out the dove again. This time, the dove returns with an olive branch in his mouth and Noah knows that there is dry land on earth. After another period of seven days, Noah, his family and all the animals leave the ark and Noah makes a sacrifice to God. God promises never again to bring a flood upon the earth and sends a rainbow as a sign of the covenant. Noah plants a vineyard and becomes drunk, is mistreated by his son Ham and as a result, Noah curses his grandson Canaan.

Some time is spent tracing Noah's descendants and giving a few details about them. Returning to their corrupt ways, the people of the earth, all of whom speak the same language, decide to build a tower in order to make a name for themselves and challenge God. Seeing the tower, God causes them all to speak different languages and scatters them throughout the earth. Ten more generations are born and recorded, until Terah, along with his grandson Lot, his son Abram and Abram's wife Sarai, begin to journey to Canaan, but end up settling in Haran.

Central Text(s)

- Genesis, chapter 6, verse 9

Essential Questions

- What about Noah causes the text to call him “righteous” and “blameless”?
- What can we learn from Noah about being righteous?
- What does Jewish tradition teach about righteousness?
- How can we strive for righteousness in our own lives?

Materials Needed

- Flip chart, chalk board or white board
- Markers, chalk or dry erase markers (to correspond with above)
- Participant Handouts (one for each participant)
- Pens/pencils (one for each participant)
- Blank Paper (one for each participant)

Session Plan***Introduction:***

A story is told of a rabbi named Simlai, whose specialty is preaching through *aggadot*, or parables. One day, he decides to preach on the commandments given in Torah. In his usual form, he begins:

Six hundred and thirteen commandments were given to Moses, three hundred and sixty-five negative commandments, corresponding to the number of solar days [in the year], and two hundred and forty-eight positive commandments, corresponding to the number of the joints and bones of the human body.

His parable is easy to interpret. Why should God give us a negative commandment for every day of the year and a positive one for every bone in the body? The answer is simple – to remind us to

occupy every bone in our body and every day of our life with following God's commandments. Simlai, however, wants to simplify things further, helping his listeners to understand the essence of the commandments. He goes on to say that in Psalm 15, King David sums up the commandments with a list of eleven, answering the question, "Adonai, who shall enter your tabernacle? Who shall dwell in your holy mountain?" Isaiah, apparently not satisfied with David's eleven commandments, brings the list down to six (Isaiah 33:15-16). Following Isaiah comes Micah, who reduces the list even further, to three commandments; as it is said: "It has been told to you, O human, what is good, and what Adonai requires of you: only to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly before your God" (Micah 6:8). Isaiah, not wanting to be outdone, came back with a mere two commandments, "...keep justice and do righteousness" (Isaiah 56:1). And then, as good preachers do, Rabbi Simlai ended his sermon on a high point, quoting the prophet Habakkuk, who boiled all 613 commandments down to one: "the righteous shall live by righteousness" (Habakkuk 2:4).⁷ On its surface, this one commandment seems easy to follow. But in reality, it is much more difficult. After all, what is righteousness? And how do we live our lives in righteous ways? Through a close look at one verse in *Parashat Noah*, we are able to begin to find the answers to these questions.

Opening Activity (10 minutes)

Welcome participants and, if they do not know each other, ask them to introduce themselves.

Explain to the participants that, in the first verse of *Parashat Noah*, we are told that, "Noah was a righteous man, he was blameless in his age; Noah walked with God." There is much debate in Jewish tradition as to exactly what this means. What qualities did Noah have that caused him to be called righteous? Was he, in fact, righteous? How can we learn from his example and practice righteousness in our own lives?

⁷ *Book of Legends: Sefer Ha-Aggadah*, Section 567, as edited by Rabbi Seymour Rossel, and further modified by the present author.

Write the word “**RIGHTEOUS**” in big letters at the top of the board (or flip chart). Tell participants that the first activity will be a word association. In turn, ask each participant to say the first word that comes to mind when thinking of “righteous.” Record answers on the board. Once each participant has shared, ask the group to look closely at the words written on the flip chart. Do they represent some sort of a description or definition of “righteous”? If not, what words or phrases should be added? Take a moment to add any words or phrases the participants think are missing.

Ask participants to think for a moment about people – real or fictional – who embody the characteristics/traits/etc. listed on the board. What makes these people righteous? Ask participants to share their thoughts. Finally, ask participants if they consider themselves to be righteous? Why or why not? Take some time for people to share with the group.

Read the Text (10 minutes)

Give each participant a copy of the participant handout. Ask a member of the group to read Genesis, chapter 6, verse 9, aloud and then summarize it for the group. Discuss the following with participants:

- What is your initial reaction to the text? What strikes you about this text?
- Why do you think the text finds it necessary to point out that Noah was righteous and blameless?
- What do you think it means that Noah was righteous and blameless?
- What do you think it means to “walk with God”?
- Based on what you already know about Noah’s story, do you agree with these statements?

Tell participants that Jewish scholars have, for centuries, been debating these very points. Was Noah really righteous? What made Noah righteous? And how can we live our own lives in such a way as to be righteous? The remainder of the session will focus on answering these questions.

Noah Was a Righteous Man (30 minutes)

Direct participants to the section in the participant handout entitled, “Noah Was a Righteous Man.” Ask a volunteer to read the first text in this section. Tell participants that there is a lengthy debate in many sources discussing whether Noah would have been considered righteous if he had lived in the time of Abraham or Moses, or if his righteousness stood out simply because he lived in a time of such evil. Ask participants to think back to the people they mentioned during the opening activity. Ask participants: if those people had lived in another time, would they still have been considered righteous? Why or why not?

Regardless of whether Noah’s righteousness would have been recognized in another generation, it is recognized in his generation. So, what about Noah made him righteous? Many sources seek to answer just this question. Ask participants to spend a few moments with a partner or two reading the remaining quotations in this section and discussing them. In particular, ask participants to focus on the main points of each quotation, keeping a list of those characteristics/traits/etc. ascribed to Noah.

When participants have finished reading and discussing each text, bring the group back together. Taking each text and each group in turn, ask participants to share what they gleaned from the texts and record their answers on another section of the board (or a different paper from the flip chart). Record all answers given by the participants and, in particular, focus on the following characteristics from each text:

- Sarna (“In the face of...”)
 - Goodness in the face of evil
 - Civilized behavior
- Seforno (“He walked in God’s way...”)
 - Helping others
 - Teaching others

- Genesis Rabbah (“...it indicates a righteous man...”)
 - Concern with others
 - Teaching others
- Kimchi (“His deeds reflected...”)
 - Fair in judgment and deed
 - Philanthropic
 - Goodness in the face of evil
- Ibn Ezra (“In his deeds.”)
 - Does good deeds
 - Has/maintains good intentions
- Ramban (“Scripture mentions that he was...”)
 - Innocence
 - Acts in a moral way

Once the list is complete, compare it to the list recorded during the opening activity. See if correlations can be made between the characteristics of Noah and those the group came up with for a righteous person. Can Noah be considered righteous according to the terms of the group? Are there characteristics that he is missing? Having read the texts in this section, would the group add any more characteristics to the first list? If so, add those characteristics to the list.

What Does it Mean to be Righteous? (30 minutes)

Tell participants that Jewish tradition is rich with ideas about how to be righteous. Ask participants if they have any ideas about how they think Judaism might teach people to be righteous? What qualities do they think Judaism would ascribe to a righteous person? Ask them to keep these ideas in mind as they read the following texts.

Direct participants to the section in the participant handout entitled, “What Does it Mean to be Righteous?” The first six quotations are from the Bible and deal directly with the qualities and deeds of a righteous person. Ask participants to read aloud each of the first six quotations listed. Do any of the qualities surprise participants? Why? Does any one quotation stand out to any participant? Why? Do the participants agree or disagree with the Bible’s treatment of righteousness? Do any of the characteristics match those recorded on the lists from the previous activities?

Rabbinic and modern sources comment further on the attributes of righteous people. Read and summarize each quotation in turn and focus on the following guide questions for each text:

- Genesis Rabbah (“Thus it is written...”)
 - If “life, religious actions, and good deeds” are the “fruit of the righteous,” how does one structure his or her life to attain these ends?
 - Genesis Rabbah ends its comment by saying that Noah’s offspring were his righteousness and good deeds. Is simply having offspring enough to be righteous? Or do our offspring have to be righteous as well?
- The Chumash: The Stone Edition (“The verse began to introduce...”)
 - Scherman compares a person’s good deeds to his offspring. Do you agree with this comparison? Why or why not?
 - How is this similar to or different from the treatment of the same idea in the previous quotation?
- The Hasidic Anthology (“Said the Berditschever...”) **and** Rashi (“Since the text mentions...”)
 - These comments suggest that when the text says “in his age” (regarding Noah’s blamelessness) (Gen. 6:9), it refers to his good acts or good deeds.
 - The Esser Oroth comment further suggests that each good act causes a person to be reborn as a better person. Do you agree with this idea? Why or why not? Do you believe

that one good act can lead to another? Have you experienced this in your own life?

How? *(In the year 2000, the movie Pay It Forward, based on a book by Catherine Ryan Hyde, made it to the big screen. The premise of the movie is simple – sometimes the smallest idea can make the biggest difference. The teacher and protagonist in the story starts a movement with this voluntary, extra-credit assignment: THINK OF AN IDEA FOR WORLD CHANGE AND PUT IT INTO ACTION. Trevor, the 12-year-old hero, thinks of quite an idea. He describes it to his mother and teacher in the following manner: “You see, I do something real good for three people. And then when they ask how they can pay it back, I say they have to Pay It Forward. To three more people. Each. So nine people get helped. Then those people have to do twenty-seven.” Trevor turns on his calculator and punches in a few numbers. “Then it sort of spreads out, see. To eighty-one. Then two hundred forty-three. Then seven hundred twenty-nine. Then two thousand, one hundred eighty-seven. See how big it gets?” This story is a shining example of the idea that one good deed can – and does – lead to another.)*

- The Rashi comment further suggests that a person’s progeny are their good deeds.

What do you think Rashi meant by this comment? *(Later in the story, we learn that Noah’s sons are not considered righteous. With this treatment of the phrase, Rashi separates Noah’s children from his righteousness, thereby solving the problem created by equating a person’s good deeds to his or her progeny. Therefore, Rashi means that Noah’s legacy is his good deeds, not his children.)*

- Midrash Proverbs (“But how does he who...”)
- Here charity is seen as the means to righteousness. Do you agree with this idea? Why or why not?

- This Midrash suggests that charity should be given in order to receive a reward. What reward might the midrash mean? (*Likely, the midrash refers to a place in the world to come.*) Do you agree or disagree with this reason for giving charity?
- Sifre Deuteronomy (“...those who lead the many...”)
- The verse from Daniel suggests that one must lead others to righteousness in order to be righteous. Do you agree or disagree?
- Did Noah lead others to righteousness? If so, how? If not, can he, in your opinion still be considered righteous? (*The text in Genesis gives no indication that Noah led others to righteousness, or even attempted to do so. What’s more, there is no indication that Noah spoke on behalf of his fellow humans, whom he knew were to be destroyed in the flood. However, several rabbinic sources indicate that Noah did attempt to warn his contemporaries {as in Genesis Rabbah 30:7}. For further reading on this issue, see: the complete text of Sarna on Gen. 6:9 and A Torah Commentary for Our Times, Vol. 1, Parashat Noah, pp. 30-31.*)
- This text also suggests that among the righteous, there is no “enmity, jealousy and contention.” Do you agree with this assessment? Why or why not? Why might it be important for the righteous to be without “enmity, jealousy and contention”?
- A Torah Commentary for Our Times (“The eighteenth century Chasidic master...”)
- Fields makes a distinction between one who is “genuinely righteous” and one who “dresses like a righteous person.” Which was Noah? Why?
- Should a person who “dresses like a righteous person” still be considered righteous?

Based on the quotations in this section, as well as the discussion generated from the quotations, create a third list of the qualities and characteristics of a righteous person. Compare this list with the lists from the two previous activities. Again, look for overlapping ideas and characteristics.

Concluding Activity (10 minutes)

Display all three lists from the previous activities side by side. Working with *chevruta* partners, ask participants to choose the ten most important characteristics listed and then to create a top ten list of qualities a righteous person should have, using the terms and ideas set forth in the displayed lists. Once participants have had time to create their lists, ask them to spend a few minutes discussing with their partners how and whether they embody these characteristics in their own lives. If they feel that they do not embody a certain characteristic, how can they do so in the future?

Just before the session ends, bring the group back together and ask a volunteer to read the quotation on the participant handout under the section entitled, “The Righteous Self.” Ask participants to share their reactions to the text.

Thank participants for coming and remind them that by working actively to make good choices and practice righteousness in our lives, we will truly be able to be the greatest versions of ourselves that we can be. We do not need to be Abraham, Moses or Noah; we simply have to live up to our potential to be the righteous of our own age.

פרשת נח

Parashat Noah

Participant Handout

Genesis, Chapter 6, Verse 9

This is the line of Noah. — Noah was a righteous man; he was blameless in his age; Noah walked with God.

Noah Was a Righteous Man

IN HIS AGE. R. Judah and R. Nehemiah differed. R. Judah said: Only in his generations was he a righteous man [by comparison]; had he flourished in the generation of Moses or Samuel, he would not have been called righteous... R. Nehemiah said: If he was righteous even in his generation, (In spite of his corrupt environment) how much more so [had he lived] in the age of Moses.

Genesis *Rabbah* 30:9

IN HIS AGE. In the face of universal corruption, he maintained civilized standards of behavior.

Sarna on Gen. 6:9

NOAH WALKED WITH GOD. He walked in God's way trying to be helpful to others, and to instruct and if necessary to rebuke them, as our sages pointed out.

Seforno on Gen. 6:9

NOAH WAS A RIGHTEOUS MAN; HE WAS BLAMELESS IN HIS AGE. ...it indicates a righteous man who warned [his generation]. For a whole one hundred and twenty years Noah planted cedars and cut them down. On being asked, "Why are you doing this?" he replied: "The Lord of the universe has informed me that He will bring a Flood in the world." Said they [his contemporaries] to him: If a Flood does come, it will come only upon your father's house!"

Genesis *Rabbah* 30:7

RIGHTEOUS. His deeds all reflected fairness, charitable considerations, in contrast to those of his contemporaries who were men of violence. NOAH WALKED WITH GOD. A description of how Noah cleaved to his Creator. All his actions were designed to please his Creator.

Kimchi on Gen. 6:9

NOAH WAS A RIGHTEOUS MAN. In his deeds. HE WAS BLAMELESS. In his heart.

Ibn Ezra on Gen. 6:9

NOAH WAS A RIGHTEOUS MAN; HE WAS BLAMELESS. Scripture mentions that he was guiltless and perfect in his righteousness in order to inform us that he was worthy to be saved from the flood

without any punishment whatever since he was whole-hearted in his righteousness... And Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra said, “*Righteous* in deeds; [*blameless*] in his heart.” However, it is written, *Thou art [blameless] in thy ways* (Ez. 28:15); {the term [“blameless”] is thus used in connection with “ways” and *not* with matters of the heart}.

Ramban on Gen. 6:9

What Does it Mean to be Righteous?

The righteous man holds to his way...

Job 17:9

The wicked man borrows and does not repay; the righteous is generous and keeps giving.

Psalms 37:21

The mouth of the righteous utters wisdom, and his tongue speaks what is right.

Psalms 37:30

A righteous man gives his friend direction, but the way of the wicked leads astray.

Proverbs 12:26

The heart of the righteous man rehearses his answer, but the mouth of the wicked blurts out evil things.

Proverbs 15:8

A righteous man is concerned with the cause of the wretched...

Proverbs 29:7

THIS IS THE LINE OF NOAH. Thus it is written, “The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life; A wise man captivates people” (Prov. 11:30): what is the fruit of the righteous? Life, religious actions, and good deeds. (Interpreting: The offspring of Noah were his righteousness and good deeds.)

Genesis *Rabbah* 30:6

The verse [Gen. 6:9] began to introduce the list of Noah’s offspring, but once he was mentioned, Scripture praised him as a righteous man...R’ Moshe Feinstein comments homiletically on why the Torah likens a person’s good deeds to his offspring. A person should *love* good deeds, the way he loves his own children, and he should perform them out of love, not just duty. A person should never disparage a good deed as being insignificant, just as he does not fail to love a child who lacks outstanding ability. And a person should work hard to perfect his deeds, just as he spares no effort to help his children.

The Chumash: The Stone Edition on Gen. 6:9

Said the Berditschever: “We read (Gen. 6:9): “This is the line of Noah. — Noah was a righteous man; he was blameless in his age...” We learn from this verse that the good man’s generations [age] are his good acts, the means by which he is continually reborn as a better and better man.

The Hasidic Anthology, p. 161

THIS IS THE LINE OF NOAH – NOAH WAS A RIGHTEOUS MAN. ...since after stating “this is the line of Noah,” it does not at once mention the names of his children but declares that he “was a righteous man”, Scripture thereby teaches you that the real progeny of righteous people are their good deeds (Genesis Rabbah 30).

Rashi on Gen. 6:9, as quoted in *Pentateuch with Targum Onkelos, Haphtaroth and Rashi’s Commentary*

...But how does he who follows after righteousness find righteousness? Because God will give him money to do charity with it to men worthy of charity, so that he may receive reward...

Midrash Proverbs 14:34, as quoted in *A Rabbinic Anthology*, p. 311

“...those who lead the many to righteousness will be like the stars forever and ever.” (Daniel 12:3).

As among the stars there is no enmity, jealousy and contention, so too with the righteous...

Sifre Deuteronomy, Parashat Eikev, as quoted in *A Rabbinic Anthology*, p. 87

The eighteenth-century Chasidic master Rabbi Elimelech of Lizensk once observed that there are two kinds of “righteous” persons: one is genuinely “righteous”; the other dresses like a “righteous” person in a fur coat. Each of them faces a freezing winter in a different way: one will go out and collect wood for a fire; the other will wrap himself in his fur coat. The one who collects wood lights a fire and invites others to join him. He not only warms himself but others as well. The one who makes himself cozy in his own heavy coat is secure, but those around him will freeze. For Elimelech, the genuinely “righteous” person was the one who shared warmth with others.

A Torah Commentary for Our Times, Vol. 1, *Parashat Noah*, p. 31

The Righteous Self

The Hasidic rebbe Zusha used to say: “When I die and come before the heavenly court, if they ask me, ‘Zusha, why were you not as great as Abraham?’ I will not be afraid. I will say that I was not born with Abraham’s intellectual capabilities. And if they ask me, ‘Zusha, why were you not Moses?’ I will say that I did not have Moses’ leadership abilities. But when they ask me, ‘Zusha, why were you not Zusha?’ for that I will have no answer.

Jewish Wisdom, p. 90

פרשת לך לך

Parashat Lech L'cha

Genesis 12:1 – 17:27

Synopsis

Parashat Lech L'cha begins with God instructing Abram to go forth from the land of Haran to a land that God will show him. God promises to bless Abram and to make a great nation of him. God also says that those who bless Abram will be blessed and those who curse Abram will be cursed. Abram takes his wife, Sarai, his nephew, Lot, and all of their belongings, and sets off for Canaan. When they reach Canaan, Abram travels around the country, setting up altars to God.

A famine hits the land of Canaan and Abram and his family journey to Egypt to find relief. Before they enter Egypt, Abram tells Sarai to pretend that she is his sister, so that the Egyptians will not harm him. Sarai is taken to the palace of Pharaoh, and Abram acquires much wealth. A plague is sent to the house of Pharaoh as a warning against harming Sarai, and Sarai is returned to Abram. Abram and Sarai are then escorted out of Egypt.

Abram and his family return to Canaan and settle there. As Abram and Lot have now amassed large flocks that cannot pasture together, they must separate their households. Lot moves to the outskirts of Sodom, a city known for its evil inhabitants, and Abram settles amongst the trees of Mamre in Hebron. A war breaks out among kings, including the king of Sodom, and Lot is taken captive. Abram rescues Lot, refusing the reward offered to him by the king of Sodom.

Some time later, Abram has a vision in which he is again promised that a great nation will come from him. Abram offers a sacrifice to God and God tells him that his descendants will be strangers and slaves in a strange land for four hundred years before they return to Canaan to reclaim the land. God makes a covenant with Abram, promising his offspring control of the land.

Unable to have children of her own, Sarai offers Abram her handmaiden, Hagar, as a surrogate. Once she becomes pregnant, tensions arise between Sarai and Hagar, and Hagar runs away from the

camp. An angel of God finds her, promises her that her offspring will be too many to count, tells her to name her son Ishmael and sends her back to Abram's camp.

God reaffirms the covenant with Abram and changes his name to Abraham and Sarai's to Sarah. As a sign of the covenant, Abraham is instructed to circumcise himself and those males in his household. From then on, as a sign of entry into the covenant, all male children are to be circumcised on their eighth day of life. God again promises Abraham offspring, but Abraham laughs, thinking that it is impossible for his ninety-year-old wife to bear a child. Nonetheless, God promises that in one year's time, Sarah will give birth to a son to be called Isaac. Though God promises to bless Ishmael and make him the father of twelve chieftains, the covenant will be maintained through Isaac and his offspring. When Abraham is ninety-nine and Ishmael is thirteen, both are circumcised, along with all the male members of Abraham's household.

Central Text(s)

- Genesis, chapter 17, verses 9-13

Essential Questions

- What is the *b'rit* (covenant) made between God and Abraham?
- Why is it necessary to have a sign or symbol for this *b'rit*?
- Why is circumcision chosen as the sign of the *b'rit* with Abraham? What about women's entry into the *b'rit*?
- Is this *b'rit* binding for us, as modern Jews? If so, what does it mean for us?

Materials Needed

- Participant Handouts (one for each participant)
- Pens/pencils (one for each participant)
- Blank Paper (one for each participant)
- Optional: Copies of the full text of Genesis, Chapter 17 (one for each participant)

Session Plan

Introduction:

The act of circumcision is one that was prevalent in the ancient world. In its primitive form, it was often connected to coming-of-age rituals and closely associated with male puberty. Then, circumcision was performed as part of a rite of passage, generally culminating in marriage. It is thought that the ritual was meant to enhance fertility and/or enable the male to be closer to his female partner.⁸ In making circumcision the sign of the covenant and requiring it on the eighth day of a child's life, the Torah separates the ritual from puberty and connects it with the covenant between God and Abraham and, ultimately, Abraham's male descendants (i.e. the Jewish people).

In rabbinic literature, circumcision, along with Shabbat, becomes the symbol of an observant Jew. Circumcision becomes so connected with Jewish identity, in fact, that oppressors throughout the ages attempted to forbid Jews from the practice. *The Jewish Study Bible*⁹ tells us:

A Second Temple source reports that when the Seleucid King Antiochus IV prohibited circumcision (a favorite target of anti-Semites), Jewish mothers chose martyrdom over neglect of the commandment (1 Macc. 1:60-61).

Circumcision, then, becomes the symbol of Jewish loyalty and commitment to the Jewish faith and its teachings. Even adult male converts to Judaism are expected to undergo a circumcision if they are not circumcised or a ritual called *hatafat dam* or "the drawing of blood" if they are circumcised. The shedding of a drop of blood is seen as essential to the ritual, so for a convert who is already circumcised, it is viewed as an acceptable replacement to circumcision. Circumcision is so important in Jewish tradition that one is allowed to violate Shabbat in order to perform the ritual. The only exception to the rule of circumcision is given when a child's life will be endangered by the ritual.

⁸ Rabbi Emil G. Hirsch, *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, vol. 4, p. 93

⁹ P. 38

God's *b'rit*, or covenant, with Abraham, the sign of which is circumcision, is introduced in *parashat Lech L'cha*. Abraham is instructed to circumcise himself, along with all the male members of his household, which he does at the end of the portion. God again promises Abraham progeny – a nation of progeny too great to count – and control of the land by his descendants. If this is God's promise to Abraham and his descendants, what, then, is the purpose of circumcision? Why is this ritual chosen to be the sign of the covenant? And though God's covenant is binding for all Jews, male and female alike, the sign of the covenant, circumcision, only applies to men. How, then, does a woman show her commitment to God's covenant? What is the woman's role in the *b'rit*? And since we, as modern Jews, were never given the opportunity to agree (or not agree) to the covenant, are we still bound by it? If so, how? This session will seek to answer these questions and give perspective on one of the most ancient practices of the Jewish people.

Opening Activity (10 minutes)

Welcome participants and, if they do not know each other, ask them to introduce themselves.

Explain to the participants that in this Torah portion, God makes a *b'rit*, or covenant, with Abraham. A covenant is an agreement between two parties, each of whom has a responsibility to uphold in order to fulfill the agreement. Ask participants to think of a time in their lives when they have made a covenant, or an agreement, with another person. Discuss the following with the participants:

- What were your responsibilities in the agreement?
- What were the responsibilities of the other party?
- Was there some sort of sign or symbol of the covenant? (*For example, in the purchase of a house, the sign or symbol would be the property deed.*)

- Is a sign or symbol necessary in a covenant? If so, why? What does it add to the agreement? If not, why not? How do you know that the covenant will be upheld without some sort of outward sign or symbol?

In God's covenant with Abraham, God again promises to make Abraham a great nation and also promises his descendants control of the land. Abraham and his descendants, in turn, must follow God's ways and uphold the Torah. As a sign of the covenant, Abraham is told that he must be circumcised, along with the rest of the males of his household and all those male Jewish children who come after him.

We now know the "what" of the covenant between God and Abraham, but what about the "why"? Why is circumcision chosen as the sign of the covenant? And since the act of circumcision is limited to the males of the community, are women included in the covenant? If so, how? And since according to Torah, the covenant is incumbent upon the descendants of Abraham, are we, today, bound by the covenant? What does this covenant mean for us as modern Jews? Together, we will explore the answers to these questions.

Read the Text (10 minutes)

Give each participant a copy of the participant handout. Ask a member of the group to read Genesis, chapter 17, verses 9-13, aloud and then summarize it for the group. Discuss the following with participants:

- What is your initial reaction to the text? What strikes you about this text?
- What is the agreement made between God and Abraham? *(The terms of the agreement are not explicitly mentioned in these verses. For God's promises to Abraham, see Genesis, chapter 17, verses 4-8. Abraham's end of the deal can be found in Genesis, chapter 17, verse 1. Abraham is expected to "walk in God's ways," i.e. be faithful to God and uphold Torah and the teachings of Judaism. In this selection, we are told that the sign of the covenant is to be circumcision. When*

Abraham circumcises himself, as described in Genesis, chapter 17, verses 23-27, he is, in essence, agreeing that he and his descendants will uphold the covenant.)

- Who is expected to take part in this agreement? Does this surprise you? Why or why not?
- What is the sign of this agreement? Does the sign seem fitting for the terms of the covenant?
Why or why not?

In modern culture, agreements are made between people every day. Often, the symbol of these agreements is a signature, which indicates one's willingness to take part in the agreement. By circumcising himself and his household, Abraham signed on the dotted line. Abraham agreed not only that he would uphold the covenant, but that all of his descendants would as well. Since we are all descendants of Abraham, it stands to reason that the covenant is binding for us as well. So, if we are meant to keep this covenant, perhaps we should learn a bit more about it.

The Sign of the Covenant (20 minutes)

Direct participants to the section in the participant handout entitled, "The Sign of the Covenant." With *chevruta* partners, ask participants to read each quotation in turn and discuss briefly, focusing on what each text teaches us about the *b'rit*. When participants have had a chance to discuss the quotations, bring them back together as a group and discuss the following:

- What does circumcision represent with regard to the covenant? *(It is a reminder for us to live according to the covenant, it represents our willingness to uphold our end of the covenant, it expresses our faithfulness to God, it sets the Jewish people apart from the rest of the nations of the world, it represents the eternal nature of the covenant, etc.)*
- In what ways do you agree with the commentators? What do you think circumcision represents with regard to the covenant? What are the ways in which you think it was an appropriate choice for a sign of the covenant?

- If the ritual of circumcision (or that of naming for female children) is meant to represent our willingness to uphold the covenant with God, it seems odd that the ritual is performed on a child who is clearly not able to voice his or her agreement with the covenant. What, then, is the point of these rituals? *(To indicate the parents' commitment to raising their children Jewishly, according to Jewish values and customs. In other words, as part of the b'rit.)*
- The quotes from *The Chumash: The Stone Edition* and Seforno (third Seforno quotation in the section) indicate that there is a reason that the sign of the covenant is related to the male reproductive organ. What is this reason? *(To indicate that the covenant is not only incumbent upon all generations, but also passed down through the generations.)* Do you agree with this reasoning? Why or why not?
- The quotation from *Torah Gems* reminds us that circumcision is a sign that lasts forever. Why do you think it is important that the sign of the covenant be permanent?

It is clear from these quotations, as well as through our own modern practice of Judaism, that circumcision is given great importance in tradition. But circumcision can only be practiced by males and God speaks only to Abraham (and not to Sarah) when giving the terms of the covenant. So is the covenant really incumbent upon all Jews, or just the males? Let us take a look at what the sources have to say about this issue.

Incumbent Upon All Jews (20 minutes)

Direct participants to the section in the participant handout entitled, "Incumbent Upon All Jews." Together with the whole group, read and summarize each quotation in turn and focus on the following guide questions for each text:

- Rashi ("You' is plural and refers...")

- Rashi interprets the language of verse 10 to mean that the covenant is between God, Abraham, all those living at the time and all those who are “yet to be born.” Would you interpret the verse the same way? Why or why not?
- Kimchi (“Just as I keep and observe...”)
- Kimchi looks at the semantics of verse 10 to determine its true meaning. In the verse, the Hebrew word for “you shall keep,” **וְתִשְׁמְרוּ**, is in the plural form. Kimchi takes this to mean that all of the Jewish people for all time are a part of the covenant. Do you agree that this one word in plural form is enough to indicate that all Jews are meant to be a part of the covenant?
- Are there other words or phrases in Genesis, chapter 17, verses 9-13, that indicate that the covenant is meant to include all Jews? (*In verse 9, “you and your offspring to come throughout the ages;” in verse 10, “you and your offspring to follow;” in verse 12, “throughout the generations, every male among you;” in verse 13, “thus shall my covenant be marked in your flesh as an everlasting pact.”*)
- *The Torah: A Woman’s Commentary* (“Five times in this passage...”)
- Is this statement from the women’s commentary consistent with your reading of the biblical passage? Is it consistent with Rashi and Kimchi’s views? If there are any differences, what are they?
- This passage suggests that males are to “bear circumcision as a mark of the covenant.” Do women bear a mark of the covenant? If so, what is it? (*Perhaps childbirth can be considered the woman’s mark of the covenant. See the next quotation for more about this. Another possibility is that a woman’s menstrual cycle is the sign of the covenant. If, as mentioned in the introduction, the spilling of blood is essential to circumcision, it*

would follow logically that a woman's monthly spilling of blood is somehow related.¹⁰ It is also a possibility that women bear no mark of the covenant.) Why might males (and not females) need to bear an obvious mark of the covenant? What does this say about the differences of the genders? (Perhaps because males by nature are more aggressive than females, they are more likely to engage in dangerous behavior, so they need a stark physical representation that reminds them to behave in righteous and upright ways. Perhaps females by nature are more reflective than males and, therefore, do not require a physical reminder of the covenant.)

- *The Torah: A Woman's Commentary* ("The critical element of the *b'rit*...")
 - This quotation suggests that men and women are equal partners in the covenant and even that women have a crucial role in fulfilling the covenant. How does a woman's role as childbearer help to fulfill the covenant?
 - Do you agree with the idea that men and women are equal partners in the covenant? Is it possible for one to fulfill the covenant without the other? In other words, how important to the fulfilling of the covenant is childbirth? Does one have to have a child in order to fulfill the covenant? If one does not have children, how can she or he fulfill the covenant?

The commentaries we have just studied are quite clear in their belief that *all* Jews are a part of the covenant. Not only does the biblical language indicate this to be so, but the traditional sources agree, as do modern interpretations of the verses. So, whether we like it or not, we, as Jews, are bound by this covenant. According to traditional standards, Jews uphold the covenant by following the commandments laid out in Torah and perpetuating the Jewish people. Reform Judaism,

¹⁰ For more on this, see *The Torah, A Women's Commentary*, pp. 80-81

however, is not a law-based movement; it is an ethically-based movement. So, aside from perpetuating the Jewish people, how can the modern Reform Jew observe the covenant?

Concluding Activity (30 minutes)

Direct participants to the section in the participant handout entitled, “The Covenant and the Modern Jew.” Read the first quotation aloud to participants and ask a member of the group to summarize the quotation. Ask participants what they think it means. To what “active response” (or responses) might Sarna be referring? What does it mean to be committed “to a life lived in the consciousness of that covenant”?

Harvey Fields, the author of *A Torah Commentary for our Times*, uses a *midrash* to help answer this question. Ask a volunteer to read the second quotation in this section aloud. Discuss the following with participants:

- What does the *midrash* quoted in this text teach us about our role in the covenant?
(Circumcision is a reminder of the fact that humans are not perfect and should constantly strive to better themselves and the world around them. By doing this according to the traditions of the Jewish people, we uphold our end of the covenant.)
- How does Fields interpret the *midrash*? *(In his introduction to the midrash, he suggests that we should engage in tikkun, or repairing, because circumcision is meant to teach us that we, and our world, are not perfect. He also says that the midrash urges us to live ethical lives and constantly work to improve ourselves.)* Do you agree with his interpretation? If not, how would you interpret the *midrash*?
- In the last sentence of this quotation, Fields refers to the *b’rit* (covenant) and *b’rit milah* (circumcision) as the sign of a “contract” Jews have with God. In this contract, Jews agree to work to better ourselves and the world. Do you feel that this is an accurate description of the covenant and the act of circumcision? Do you agree or disagree? Why?

Ask a volunteer to read the last quotation on the text sheet. Tell participants that though this quotation is mostly for comic relief, it also speaks to the tensions we feel as Jews in America trying to be a part of two distinct worlds. For the most part, the Jews of America (particularly Reform Jews) do not wear their Judaism on their sleeves. So, if we do not bear any outward signs of Judaism, does circumcision take on a new importance? How do we uphold our end of the covenant while still navigating the bridges between the two worlds in which we live?

Though these sources give us some indication of what the covenant means for us as modern Jews, Reform Judaism presents an interesting challenge to answering this question. As Reform Jews, we are taught the ideal of choice through knowledge. In other words, after learning about all of the traditions of Judaism, we engage in those aspects of our tradition that are meaningful to us, offer depth in our relationship with God and bring us closer to Judaism. Therefore, each Reform Jew will likely have his or her own way of upholding the covenant. It is up to each of us to determine how we, in our own lives, will be active participants in the covenant.

Give each participant a pen or pencil and a blank piece of paper (*if you really want to get the creative juices flowing, put out colored pencils or a box of markers*). Tell participants that they will now have the opportunity to create their own version of the covenant with God. Participants should be as creative as possible and use whatever means speaks to them. One suggestion would be for participants to write their own text for the covenant. Participants could also write poetry, songs, prose, tell a story or draw a picture. As they create their versions of the covenant, ask them to think about the following and express their thoughts in their work.

- In Genesis, chapter 17, God promises that the Jews will be a great nation and have control of the land. In your version of the covenant, would God promise anything else? If so, what?

- Abraham, on his own and our behalf, promised that we would “walk in God’s ways” in order to uphold our end of the covenant. What does it mean to you to “walk in God’s ways”? How will you uphold your end of the covenant? What will you promise God?
- Is there a sign or symbol of your covenant? What is the sign or symbol? Is it the same for everyone or different from person to person?

Once participants have had time to create their covenants, ask volunteers to share with the group. When everyone who is interested has had a chance to share, thank participants for coming and remind them to take their covenants home and post them on their refrigerators. Remind participants that even though we may have been entered into this covenant without our knowledge or agreement, it can still hold great meaning in our lives. Not only that, it can give our lives purpose. What’s more, it connects us to the many generations of Jews who came before us and the many that, we hope, will come after us.

פרשת לך לך

Parashat Lech L'cha

Participant Handout

Genesis, Chapter 17, Verses 9-13

⁹ God further said to Abraham, "As for you, you and your offspring to come throughout the ages shall keep My covenant. ¹⁰ Such shall be the covenant between Me and you and your offspring to follow which you shall keep: every male among you shall be circumcised. ¹¹ You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin, and that shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you. ¹² And throughout the generations, every male among you shall be circumcised at the age of eight days. As for the homeborn slave and the one bought from an outsider who is not of your offspring, ¹³ they must be circumcised, homeborn, and purchased alike. Thus shall My covenant be marked in your flesh as an everlasting pact.

The Sign of the Covenant

Circumcision is both a symbol of God's covenant and a mark of the commitment to a life lived in awareness of that covenant. The law of circumcision is the first mitzvah in the Torah addressed to Abraham and his descendants.

Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary, p. 90

YOU...SHALL KEEP MY COVENANT. "Just as I keep My part of the covenant, I want you to keep your part of My covenant." Unless the covenant is respected mutually it will be invalid.

Seforno on Gen. 17:9

THE SIGN OF THE COVENANT. As a constant reminder to walk in His paths. The sign of the circumcision is to be like the stamp on the skin of a slave identifying him as belonging to a certain master.

Seforno on Gen. 17:11

THE SIGN OF THE COVENANT. Circumcision is literally a *sign*, a mark, on the body, stamping its bearer as a servant of God; just as their souls are different than those of other nations, so their bodies must be different. God ordained that this sign be placed on the reproductive organ to symbolize that circumcision is essential to Jewish eternity.

The Chumash: The Stone Edition on Gen. 17:11

IN YOUR FLESH...Seeing that the organ on which the covenant with God is marked is the organ instrumental in ensuring a man's continuity beyond death through the genes of his offspring, it is

appropriate that the covenant which represents the eternal intimate and reciprocal relationship of God and the Jewish people should be symbolized in this manner.

Seforno on Gen. 17:13

This sign remains forever. All the other commandments can be ignored or removed, except for this one. One can remove his distinctive Jewish guise, but the sign of circumcision is a perpetual one.

Torah Gems, vol. 1, p. 126

Incumbent Upon All Jews

BETWEEN ME AND YOU. *"You" is plural and refers to all those belonging to Abraham who were then alive.* AND YOUR OFFSPRING TO FOLLOW. Those who are yet to be born.

Rashi on Gen. 17:10, as quoted in *Pentateuch with Targum Onkelos, Haphtaroth and Rashi's Commentary*

THE SIGN OF THE COVENANT. Just as I keep and observe my end as spelled out in verse 7, so you must keep and observe it. The Torah employs the plural mode when speaking of Abraham and his descendants...The covenant was to be between God (singular) and the Jewish people (plural).

Kimchi on Gen. 17:10

Five times in this passage [verses 7-10], God refers to the covenant's other party as "you and your descendants" (literally "seed"); this indicates that membership in the covenant is not limited to males, although every male is to bear circumcision as a mark of the covenant. This covenant is with Abraham and Sarah's offspring regardless of gender.

The Torah: A Women's Commentary, p. 75

The critical element of the *b'rit* is the promise that Abraham will be fruitful and become the father of nations. Women's role as childbearers is therefore not ancillary but central to meaning of the covenant...This underscores Sarah's crucial role; it makes Sarah and Abraham, physically speaking, equal partners in the covenant.

The Torah: A Women's Commentary, p. 80

The Covenant and the Modern Jew

God's promises demand an active response from their recipients. Circumcision is both a token of God's covenant and a symbol of the Jew's consecration and commitment to a life lived in the consciousness of that covenant.

Sarna on Gen. 17:9-14

For some Jewish teachers, circumcision represents more than a sacred sign of Jewish identity or a symbol of the covenant of the Jewish people with God. There are those interpreters who believe that circumcision is a way of teaching human beings that the world is imperfect and requires *tikun*, or “improvement.” In the Midrash, the rabbis report the following:

The Roman general Turnus Rufus once asked Rabbi Akiba: “If your God is so powerful, and wanted male children circumcised, then why isn’t each child simply born with the circumcision already done?”

Rabbi Akiba replied: “God gave all the commandments to the people of Israel so that they could perfect themselves by doing them. God wished that individuals would take on the responsibility of perfecting themselves and the world through the practice of the commandments. The commandment of circumcision reminds us that, just as we need to improve ourselves physically, so do we need to improve ourselves and our world spiritually (*Midrash Tanchuma* and *Sefer ha-Hinuch* 57).

In other words, circumcision is a sacred lesson. It is a powerful symbol of Jewish identity. It serves as a reminder to Jews of their ethical tasks and responsibilities. It also teaches us that our talents and abilities require improvement. Our defects and deficiencies should be corrected and repaired. Just as the male baby requires the improvement of circumcision, so the world requires human beings to perfect it. *[B’rit] milah* is the sign that Jews were “contracted” to God for the work of perfecting both themselves and the world.

A Torah Commentary for Our Times, p. 42

A young Talmudic scholar left Minsk and went to America. After many years, he returned to the old country. His aged mother could hardly recognize him. He was dressed in the very latest fashion. “Where is your beard?” his mother asked, aghast.

“Nobody wears a beard in America.”

“But at least you kept the Sabbath?”

“In America almost everybody works on the Sabbath.”

The old mother sighed. “And how is it with the food?” she asked hopefully.

“Ah, mama,” answered the son, apologetically, “it’s too much trouble to be *kosher* in America.”

The old mother hesitated. Then, in a confidential voice, she whispered, “Tell your old mother, son – are you still circumcised?”

A Treasury of Jewish Folklore, p. 20

פרשת וירא

Parashat Vayeira

Genesis 18:1 – 22:24

Synopsis

In the beginning of *parashat Vayeira*, we find Abraham sitting outside of his tent on a hot day and we are told that God appears to him. Abraham then sees three men standing near him; he invites them to wash their feet and join him for a meal. Abraham and Sarah prepare a meal for the men, who then predict that Sarah will have a son next year. Sarah overhears the conversation and laughs at the prediction, wondering how a couple as advanced in years as she and Abraham are could possibly have a child.

God decides to tell Abraham of his intention to destroy the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah and Abraham protests God's decision, asking if God will sweep away the innocent along with the guilty. Abraham negotiates with God, finally convincing God to save the cities for the sake of only ten innocent people.

Two angels disguised as men arrive at Lot's house in Sodom and he invites them to spend the night. An angry mob of townspeople come to Lot's house, asking that he bring the men out of the house so that they can be intimate with the men. Lot offers his daughters in place of the men, but the townspeople refuse and attempt to attack Lot. The angels pull him into the safety of the house and the townspeople are blinded by a bright light, which prevents them from finding the entrance to the house.

The angels tell Lot of God's plan to destroy the cities and Lot tries to convince his sons-in-law and daughters to flee with him, his wife and his two unmarried daughters. They do not believe Lot, so it is only Lot, his wife and their unmarried daughters who flee the destruction. Lot and his family are instructed to flee and not look back, but Lot's wife cannot resist and is, therefore, turned into a

pillar of salt. Lot's daughters, afraid that they are the last people on earth, give Lot wine, get him drunk and become impregnated by him.

Abraham continues to journey throughout the land and settles for a time in Gerar. While there, he encounters King Abimelech, and tells him that Sarah is his sister, not his wife. In a dream, God warns Abimelech to stay away from Sarah and return her to Abraham. Because of this incident, God closes the wombs of all the women in Abimelech's household. Abraham intercedes on their behalf and heals them and, along with Sarah and the riches that Abimelech bestows upon him, leaves the presence of the king.

As promised, the following year, Sarah gives birth to a baby boy, named Isaac (named so because the root of the Hebrew word "Isaac" means "laughter"). Sarah is concerned about the influence Ishmael will have on Isaac and asks Abraham to send Hagar away. God tells Abraham to do as Sarah asks, so Abraham sends Hagar and Ishmael into the desert with some bread and water. After a time, the rations run out and God hears Ishmael's pained cries. An angel of God comes to Hagar and God opens a well for Hagar and the boy to drink. God promises to make a nation of the boy and remains with him as he grows up to be a bowman.

Abimelech and Abraham make a pact of honesty and loyalty, and Abraham comes to dwell in the land of the Philistines. Some time later, God tests Abraham, telling Abraham to take Isaac to the land of Moriah and offer him as a sacrifice atop a mountain. Without questioning, Abraham takes his son to the place and they traverse the mountain together. Abraham prepares Isaac for the sacrifice and is just about to perform it when an angel of God stops him. Abraham sees a ram caught in a thicket and offers it as a sacrifice instead. Due to Abraham's unwavering faith, God again promises that Abraham will be the father of a great nation and that all other nations will be blessed by his descendants. At the end of the portion, Abraham learns that his brother has had several children, a woman named Rebecca among them.

Central Text(s)

- Genesis, chapter 18, verses 20-32

Essential Questions

- Why would God be willing to destroy innocent people?
- What made it appropriate for Abraham to question God's authority?
- What can we learn from Abraham's reaction to God's decision?

Materials Needed

- Participant Handouts (one for each participant)
- Pens/pencils (one for each participant)
- Blank Paper (one for each participant)
- Flip chart, chalk board or white board
- Markers, chalk or dry-erase markers (to correspond with above)

Session Plan**Introduction:**

In this Torah portion, we learn much about the Patriarch Abraham. From his treatment of the three angels (disguised as men) who visit his tent, we learn that he is a hospitable and welcoming man. From God's decision to tell Abraham about God's intent to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, we learn that Abraham is a prophet (because he receives the word of God). And from Abraham's decision to plead with God to save the lives of the innocent in Sodom and Gomorrah, we learn of Abraham's love for humanity, his commitment to justice and his desire for Divine mercy. From Abraham's decision to abide by Sarah's wishes regarding Hagar and Ishmael, we learn the importance of *shalom babayit*, or keeping peace in the home. And from Abraham's willingness to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice to God, we learn of his unwavering faith.

Yet for all we learn from this Torah portion, the stories within it give rise to some serious questions. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah forces us to ask: Is God really willing to sacrifice innocent people along with wicked ones? Even if people are wicked, do they deserve to be destroyed? What made it appropriate for Abraham to argue with God and question God's decision? And why did Abraham feel that it was his duty to plead for the lives of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah?

While the other stories in this portion also give rise to serious questions, for the purpose of this Torah study, we will focus on the issues that come up with the telling of the story of Abraham's attempt to save Sodom and Gomorrah. In particular, we will focus on the idea that God is (again) willing to destroy humanity for their evil ways and the fact that Abraham, for whatever reason, is compelled to argue on behalf of those people. We will also look briefly at what we, as modern Jews, can learn from Abraham's example.

Opening Activity (10 minutes)

Welcome participants and, if they do not know each other, ask them to introduce themselves.

Ask participants to think about a time in their lives when they questioned or were angry with God. Ask them to think about the circumstances of the situation, how they responded, and the ultimate outcome of the situation. Ask if any participants are willing to share their stories, and allow some time for them to do so.

Once those who are interested have had an opportunity to share, ask them to think more deeply about the situation they described. Ask them to think about their relationship with God prior to the situation and whether or not it changed after the situation. If it did change, how so? Did the participant become angry at God or question God during that time? Did they feel comfortable doing so? Why or why not? Again, ask if any participants are willing to share, and allow time for them to do so.

Explain to the participants that in this session, we will look at a time when Abraham questioned God – specifically God’s decision to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. We will study in depth God’s seeming willingness to destroy whole towns of people and Abraham’s questioning of God’s decision. Finally, we will look at how we can apply the lessons of this story to our own lives.

Read the Text (10 minutes)

Give each participant a copy of the participant handout. Ask a member of the group to read Genesis, chapter 18, verses 20-32, aloud and then summarize these verses for the group. Discuss the following with participants:

- What is your initial reaction to the text? What strikes you about this text?
- What questions does this text raise for you?
- Does it surprise you that God seems so willing (again) to destroy humanity because of their evil ways? Why or why not?
- Does it surprise you that Abraham is so willing to jump in and question God’s decision? Why or why not?
- If you were Abraham, and God told you that the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were to be destroyed, would you have acted in the same way? Why or why not?

Remind the participants that, although the portion of text we just read does not reveal the end of the story, we all know that Sodom and Gomorrah were, ultimately, destroyed. If we can assume that God knew all along that no innocents aside from Lot existed in the cities and, therefore, knew that the cities would ultimately be destroyed, what is the point of the conversation that occurs in the text we read? And what do we do with the theological issues this text raises? Are we willing to believe that God will allow innocent people to die? What do we make of the fact that Abraham is willing to question God’s decision? And what can we learn from this story?

Will You Sweep Away the Innocent? (20 minutes)

Direct participants to the section in the participant handout entitled, “Will You Sweep Away the Innocent?” Tell participants that commentators throughout the ages have been troubled by the fact that God seems so willing to destroy innocent people. They have struggled with what this text says about Divine justice and mercy and have commented at great length about the issue. Some of these comments are featured in this section of the handout. Together with the whole group, read and summarize each quotation in turn and focus on the following guide questions for each text:

- Kimchi (“The Torah writes in this vein...”)
 - Kimchi is troubled by the fact that the Torah tells us that God will go down to Sodom and see if the people really are wicked. This troubles Kimchi because of the traditional Jewish belief that God is ever-present and all-knowing. If that is the case, wouldn’t God already know how the people of Sodom and Gomorrah are behaving? Kimchi suggests that the Torah uses this language to “remind people” that God is patient and “in complete control” of the situation and decision-making process. Why do *you* think the Torah uses this language? Do you agree with Kimchi’s assessment? Why or why not?
(Maimonides suggests that Torah uses language that can be easily understood by humans reading the text. So another possibility is that God did not literally come down to see, but rather, that Torah uses that language in order that we may understand that God’s final decision is not yet made.)
 - Do you believe that God is “perfectly aware of all that goes on here on earth?” If so, does that inform the decisions you make and actions you take in your daily life? If not, what do you believe is God’s role with regard to earth and humanity?
- Torah Gems (“R’ Abba bar Kahana said...”)

- This text interprets the language of verse 21 differently than Kimchi does. This text suggests that God goes down to Sodom and Gomorrah to offer the people an opportunity to repent. Which interpretation do you prefer? Why?
- Assume for a moment that Rabbi Abba bar Kahana is correct. Do you feel more or less comfortable about the fact that God destroyed the cities knowing that the people first had a chance to repent? Why?
- As Jews, we are taught that the gates of repentance are always open. In other words, God is always open to the repentance of the sinner. If the gates of repentance are always open, why wouldn't God have allowed these people to live in the hope that they would, someday, repent for their sins? (*Perhaps God did not believe that the ways of the people living in these cities would ever change. See the next quotation in the section, from Etz Chayim: Torah and Commentary, for more on this idea.*)
- Etz Chayim: Torah and Commentary ("If a community can produce...")
 - This commentator subscribes to the idea that goodness breeds goodness and wickedness breeds wickedness. Do you agree with this idea? Why or why not? Have you seen examples of this in your own life? If so, what are they?
 - Based on what you know about Sodom and Gomorrah, do you think that if any righteous people existed in the city, they would have been able to influence others? In other words, does it seem that the people of these cities were beyond the point of no return? Why or why not?
- Ramban ("He assured him that...")
 - Ramban suggests that God allows Abraham to engage in the questioning because God had not yet made a final decision about what to do with Sodom and Gomorrah. The people of Sodom and Gomorrah, as it were, are on trial. In this trial, for what do you

think God is looking? Is it repentance, as the quotation from Torah Gems suggests, or is it something else? If it is something else, for what is God looking?

- Yoma (“Even for the sake...”)
 - This teaching from the Talmud suggests that one righteous person is enough for the world to continue existing. If this is the case, why does God destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah? *(The text suggests that the world will continue for one righteous person. Here, God does not suggest destruction of the world, as God did during the time of Noah. God destroys only the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah because, as we know, not even one righteous person could be found in those cities.)*

Ask participants if their opinion of God’s intentions and actions has changed now that they have studied these texts. Was God actually willing to destroy the righteous? Based on the text itself, as well as the commentaries, it seems that God was not willing to destroy the innocent along with the wicked. Not only does God “go down to see,” and perhaps judge, the people before making a final decision, God also agrees *not* to destroy the cities if righteous people exist within them. And what’s more, God allows Abraham the opportunity to plead for the lives of all the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah, not just the innocent. But, was Abraham justified in his questioning of God’s decision? Was it appropriate for Abraham to doubt God’s justice?

Abraham’s Audacity? (40 minutes)

(Allow approximately 20 minutes for this part of the session.)

Tell participants that commentators have long been discussing the fact that Abraham felt comfortable, even compelled, to discuss God’s decision with God and what that says about Abraham’s values and personality. Ask participants to think for a moment about Abraham’s role in the story. Why did he feel compelled to plead with God for the lives of the people in the cities? What does it say about his relationship with God that he felt comfortable doing this? What

personality traits must Abraham have had in order for him to take on this awesome task? In single words and short phrases, record the participant's answers to these questions on the board or flip chart.

Direct participants to the section in the participant handout entitled, "Abraham's Audacity?" With *chevruta* partners, ask participants to read each quotation in turn and discuss briefly, focusing on what the commentators have to say about Abraham, his personality and his intentions. Invite them to take a few notes on what they discover.

Once the group has had a chance to study each of the quotations in this section, bring the group back together and ask them to share what they have learned about Abraham. Though participants will come up with a myriad of answers, it is possible to focus on the following for each text:

- A Torah Commentary for Our Times ("Abraham was concerned...")
 - Abraham wanted to ensure that God's actions were just and fair
 - Abraham, being good himself, believed in the inherent good of people
 - Abraham did not believe that innocent people should be punished for the acts of the wicked in their community
- The Chumash: The Stone Edition ("Abraham exemplified...")
 - Abraham felt a responsibility, like that of a father, to his neighbors in Sodom and Gomorrah
 - Abraham was sympathetic to the plight of others
 - Abraham felt sadness for what was to happen
- Ibn Ezra ("The thrust of Abraham's...")
 - Abraham was uneasy about God's decision and what it said about Divine justice
 - Abraham desired a deeper understanding of God's decision
- Kimchi ("Abraham enquired how it was possible...")

- Again, Abraham, being good himself, believes in the inherent good of people. Abraham has a hard time believing that no righteous people exist in Sodom and Gomorrah.
- Abraham wants to ensure that God does not make God's decision out of anger
- The Jewish Study Bible ("Notice that Abraham's demand...")
 - Abraham's concern is for the innocent and the guilty alike
 - Abraham believes in humans' ability to change

Ask participants: Does what you learned in studying these texts change the way you think about Abraham? Would you add anything to the list on the board now that you have read the comments? Would you take anything off the list? Adjust the list on the board according to the participant's answers.

(Allow approximately 20 minutes for this part of the session.)

Give each *chevruta* group a pen or pencil and a piece of paper. Remind participants that the Torah rarely gives us insight into the private thoughts of its human characters. And though Torah does occasionally offer insight into the "thoughts" of God (*refer to the session for parashat B'reishit, under the heading "God Feels Human Emotions" for more on this*), the text selection we read today does not clue us in to God's "feelings" or intentions. The fact that we are not told what either Abraham or God is thinking offers us a unique opportunity to reflect on what we think the characters in the story might be thinking and feeling during their interactions. Engaging in this type of reflection allows the text to "speak" to us in ways that are both meaningful and relevant.

With their *chevruta* group, ask participants to rewrite the conversation between God and Abraham including some narration. In this narration, participants should indicate how each character is thinking or feeling at that moment in the conversation. For example, one might rewrite verse 23 as follows:

Abraham, shocked by the idea that God might destroy these cities and concerned for his neighbors, tentatively came forward, hoping that God would allow him to engage in conversation about his feelings. Deciding there was no alternative but to speak up at the injustice he saw and felt, Abraham said boldly, “Will You sweep away the innocent along with guilty?”

(Given the time constraints of the session, participants may not be able to get through the entire biblical text. Suggest that participants choose 3-5 verses to focus on and then include more verses if time allows.) Once participants have had an opportunity to complete their rewriting of the text, ask each group to share their work. Once everyone has had a chance to share, ask participants if they gained any new insight about Abraham through this activity? If so, what? Did this activity reinforce insights about Abraham that have already been discussed?

Concluding Activity (10 minutes)

Relay the following to participants: As you are no doubt aware, anger at and questioning of God is part of the life of any human who chooses to believe in God. Some of you, in the beginning of the session, already shared such instances from your own life stories. Modern commentators and scholars, in particular Reform scholars, not only believe in the questioning of God, but even encourage it. The final section of the participant handout, entitled, “Questioning God,” offers two insights into this very issue.

Direct participants to the section in the participant handout entitled, “Questioning God.” Read the two quotations aloud with participants and reflect as a group on the meanings of the quotations. Discuss the following with participants:

- What lessons do these commentators suggest that we take from the story of Abraham’s questioning of God? *(God is willing to hear and consider the questioning of humans; humans can, and should, question God when the need arises; humans should speak out against injustices*

in the world, no matter the source of these injustices; though humans have to accept reality in the end, we do have the ability to agree or disagree with the happenings in the world; and, it is incumbent upon us as Jews and humans to engage in a constant dialogue with God, in order to strengthen our relationship with God, as well as our relationship with ourselves.)

- Now that you have read these quotations, how do you feel about questioning God? Is it appropriate? Since it seems unlikely that God will appear to us in the same way God appeared to Abraham, how do we go about questioning God? How do we find the answers to our questions?
- Think back to the situation you chose during the opening activity. Given all you have learned today, might you handle that situation differently if it were to occur again?

As we grow and constantly transform into newer and better versions of ourselves, our relationship with God also transforms. This relationship transformation is a natural part of living and growing. More than likely, you do not believe in the same type of God that you did when you were, say, five years old. As we grow, experience life and its challenges and learn more and more about the workings of the world, our beliefs about God and God's role in our lives and in the world change. This is not only acceptable and natural; it is also encouraged, particularly in the world of Reform Judaism.

Thank participants for coming and remind them that in order to build and sustain our relationships with God, we must not only question God and the injustices in our world, but also actively seek to find answers to our questions and solutions to our problems. Like Abraham, in order to make the world a better place and allow for Divine justice on earth, we must draw on all of our strength and resources, take deep breaths and speak up.

פרשת וירא

Parashat Vayeira

Participant Handout

Genesis, Chapter 18, Verses 20-32

²⁰ Then the LORD said, "The outrage of Sodom and Gomorrah is so great, and their sin so grave! ²¹ I will go down to see whether they have acted altogether according to the outcry that has reached Me; if not, I will take note." ²² The men went on from there to Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the LORD. ²³ Abraham came forward and said, "Will You sweep away the innocent along with the guilty? ²⁴ What if there should be fifty innocent within the city; will You then wipe out the place and not forgive it for the sake of the innocent fifty who are in it? ²⁵ Far be it from You to do such a thing, to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty, so that innocent and guilty fare alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?" ²⁶ And the LORD answered, "If I find within the city of Sodom fifty innocent ones, I will forgive the whole place for their sake." ²⁷ Abraham spoke up, saying, "Here I venture to speak to my Lord, I who am but dust and ashes: ²⁸ What if the fifty innocent should lack five? Will You destroy the whole city for want of the five?" And He answered, "I will not destroy if I find forty-five there." ²⁹ But he spoke to Him again, and said, "What if forty should be found there?" And He answered, "I will not do it, for the sake of the forty." ³⁰ And he said, "Let not my Lord be angry if I go on: What if thirty should be found there?" And He answered, "I will not do it if I find thirty there." ³¹ And he said, "I venture again to speak to my Lord: What if twenty should be found there?" And He answered, "I will not destroy, for the sake of the twenty." ³² And he said, "Let not my Lord be angry if I speak but this last time: What if ten should be found there?" And He answered, "I will not destroy, for the sake of the ten."

Will You Sweep Away the Innocent?

I WILL GO DOWN TO SEE...The Torah writes in this vein although we know that God is perfectly aware of all that goes on here on earth. The reason why the Torah describes God's activity in this manner is only to remind people on earth that He is not in a hurry to mete out retribution, but is patient, and even when His patience is exhausted, He does not act impetuously, but is always in complete control. He examines if there is any way in which delaying retribution can be justified.

Kimchi on Gen. 18:21

I WILL GO DOWN TO SEE...R' Abba bar Kahana said, "This teaches us that He opened up for them an opportunity to repent, as it states, I WILL GO DOWN TO SEE" (Genesis *Rabbah* 49). God does

everything to ensure that not a single person will be lost. That is why we are told that He, as it were, goes down from His heights to the person who has moved away from Him, so as to bring that person up. Thus we see in the verse, I WILL GO DOWN TO SEE, that God, as it were, went down, so as to draw closer to the people of Sodom – “This teaches us that He opened up for them an opportunity to repent.”

Torah Gems, vol. 1, p. 152

FIFTY INNOCENT WITHIN THE CITY. If a community can produce a subculture of righteous people, and if they involve themselves *within the city*, trying to change it, then there is hope for that community. But if the righteous are only isolated individuals who avoid or are barred from being involved in the affairs of the city, there is no hope. One can only extricate them and condemn the rest.

Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary, p.103

I WILL NOT DESTROY IF I FIND...THERE. He assured him that He would not destroy [the city] if that number of righteous men will be found there. And He did not tell him, “Know that there is not such a number there as you said,” since their trial had not been completed, just as He said, I WILL GO DOWN TO SEE (Gen. 18:21).

Ramban on Gen. 18:28

Even for the sake of *one* righteous man the world would have been created, and for the sake of *one* righteous man it will continue.

Yoma 38b, as quoted in *A Rabbinic Anthology*, p. 231

Abraham’s Audacity?

Abraham was concerned with justice. He did not believe that good people or innocent people should suffer for the evil actions of others. So he argued on behalf of the innocent people in Sodom.

A Torah Commentary for Our Times, vol. 1, p. 48

ABRAHAM CAME FORWARD. Abraham exemplified, in its noblest form, his new role as *father of a multitude of nations*. Even the wicked inhabitants of Sodom engaged his sympathy, and he overflowed with sorrow over their impending doom.

The Chumash: The Stone Edition on Gen. 18:23

SO THAT INNOCENT AND GUILTY FARE ALIKE...The thrust of Abraham’s appeal is: How is it possible for the Judge of all the earth to act unjustly?

Ibn Ezra on Gen. 18:25

Abraham enquired how it was possible that the entire population of a city should deserve extinction. Surely, there had to be some righteous people, and why would they have to share the fate of the wicked? Onkelos understands the word *ha-af* [means both “will you” and “anger” in Hebrew, used in verse 23 to mean “will you”] as a reference to God’s anger, wrath, as if Abraham asked if[,] because God was angry[,] the innocent would suffer the fallout of that anger and be punished for the sins of the wicked.

Kimchi on Gen. 18:23

Notice that Abraham’s demand is not that the guilty be punished and the innocent be spared, but rather that the Lord *forgive* [the entire city] *for the sake of the innocent...who are in it*. The point is made more explicit in [verse] 26. The underlying theology maintains that the righteous effect deliverance for the entire community.

The Jewish Study Bible on Gen. 18:24

Questioning God

Abraham does not doubt the existence of God’s justice, he only asks its extent and limitations. The important thing is that he asks altogether and that God does not reject his question out of hand. The Bible thereby makes clear that man may, with impunity, question the behavior of God. Like Abraham, man need not surrender his own sense of justice; he remains free to accept or reject the divine judgment – although he will have to submit to it in the end. Man is not reduced to a moral automaton, his spiritual freedom is preserved.

The Torah: A Modern Commentary, p. 133

SHALL NOT THE JUDGE OF ALL THE EARTH DEAL JUSTLY? One lesson that seemed apparent to me...is that we are shown how we are permitted to question God, even to argue with God. In fact, I believe that this questioning maintains for us a healthy and sane relationship with God. An unquestioning belief in God leads to religious fanaticism... Abraham challenges God to “act” with the best judgment, to search for the right way, not necessarily the easy way. We should use this as a role model for ourselves – to learn to speak out against injustices, no matter how powerful or influential the offending party might be. And to enter into dialogue with God, to act with the gift of reason with which we are endowed.

Cantor Susan C. Dropkin, as quoted in *Learn Torah With...1995-1996 Torah Annual: A Collection of the Year’s Best Torah*, pp. 56-57

פרשת חיי שרה

Parashat Chayei Sarah

Genesis 23:1 – 25:18

Synopsis

Parashat Chayei Sarah begins by detailing the death of the matriarch Sarah, as well as Abraham's reaction to her death. Abraham then goes to the Hittites, among whom he lives, and requests to purchase a burial site in which to bury Sarah. The Hittites offer him the choicest of their burial spots and Abraham asks them to intercede with a man named Ephron so that he will sell Abraham the cave of Machpelah, which Ephron owns. Ephron hears Abraham's request and offers to give Abraham the cave free of charge. Abraham refuses to accept the offer and in the end, they agree on a price of four hundred shekels of silver for the cave. Abraham purchases the cave, and buries Sarah there.

Abraham is old and is interested in finding a wife for his son. He asks one of his servants to find a bride for Isaac from the land of Abraham's birth. The servant is concerned that such a woman would not be willing to follow him back to the land of Canaan, where Abraham and Isaac live. Abraham pleads with the servant not to take Isaac to the land, but rather to bring the woman back to Canaan, saying that an angel of God will help him find a woman who is willing to return to Canaan with the servant.

The servant sets out, with ten of Abraham's camels and much of his wealth, and eventually comes to the city of Nahor. He, along with the camels, waits by a well outside of the city until the women come to draw water, and when they do, he prays to God for assistance in his mission. He asks that God provide a woman who will not only give him water, but also offer water to the camels. No sooner has he finished his prayer when Rebecca appears and offers both him and his camels water. Upon his request, Rebecca invites him to spend the night in her father's house. Rebecca runs ahead to inform her household and Laban, her brother, comes out to meet the servant. The servant

enters the house and is offered food, but refuses to eat until he has shared his story. He tells them who he is, why he has come and how he found Rebecca at the well. Rebecca's father and brother listen to the tale and at the end, offer Rebecca as a bride for Isaac. The servant offers gifts to Rebecca and her family, and the next morning, the two set out to return to Abraham's household.

Isaac and Rebecca are married and Abraham, too, takes another wife, who gives him more children. Abraham wills all of his possessions to Isaac, but to his other sons he gives gifts during his life and eventually sends them all to live in the land of the East. Abraham dies when he is one hundred and seventy-five years old and is buried in the cave of Machpelah with Sarah. After Abraham's death, God blesses Isaac and he settles near a place called Beer-lahai-roi. We are then told of Ishmael's lineage, as well as his death.

Central Text(s)

- Genesis, chapter 23

Essential Questions

- Why is an entire chapter of Torah devoted to the purchase of a burial site?
- Why does Torah repeat the name of the place so many times in the chapter?
- Why does Abraham ask the townspeople to intercede for him so that he can buy the cave? Why is it that Abraham does not go directly to the owner of the property?
- What can we learn from this attention to detail?

Materials Needed

- Participant Handouts (one for each participant)
- Pens/pencils (one for each participant)
- Optional: Copies of the *Tanach* (Torah, Prophets and Writings)

Session Plan

Introduction:

As we know, Torah relates the story of the Jewish people from the creation of the earth to the time at which the Israelites are just about to enter the Promised Land. If we also consider the Prophetic books and the Writings, the story extends much further, to the entry and conquest of the land and the building of the *Beit haMikdash*, the Holy Temple. The stories in Torah cover a great deal of history and, as such, we expect Torah to be a lengthy work. Considering the number of stories and teachings present in *Tanach*, we might expect it to be even longer than it already is.

Torah seems to take great pains, however, to give us only the information necessary to the telling of the story. The use of flowery language and long, detailed descriptions are few and far between and we, as readers, are meant to fill in the gaps. Certainly this is one reason why such a large corpus of commentary attempting to further elucidate the concepts and stories in Torah exists. For centuries, scholars and lay people have been studying Torah, filling in details where they seem to be missing and creating *midrash* to answer questions that are not answered in the text itself.

Tradition teaches that each phrase, each word, indeed each letter holds significance in Torah. It is a commonly held belief that there are no mistakes in Torah and that the inclusion or exclusion of words, concepts and details are deliberate and purposeful. As such, scholars believe that even the repetitions in Torah have meaning. Generally, these repetitions serve to place a greater emphasis or add importance or significance to a word or concept. The same can be said of those portions of Torah that spend a great deal of time describing the details of an event or commandment.

The Torah portion we will study today, *Chayei Sarah*, is one of those rare portions that painstakingly recounts each and every detail. In this case, the details being recounted are those related to the purchase of the Cave of Machpelah, the burial site of the matriarchs and patriarchs. (Incidentally, later in the portion, great detail is given to the story of finding a wife for Isaac.) Since we know that Torah does not enter into such lengthy descriptions lightly, we must ask: what is the

significance of including so many details about the purchase of the cave? Why does the text find it necessary to repeat the name of the place so many times?

As we read the text, we will learn that Abraham spends some time negotiating with Ephron, the owner of the cave, over its purchase; however, Abraham does not approach Ephron without first asking the townspeople to intercede on his behalf. Why is this necessary? What is the purpose of having the intermediary? Why is it that Abraham is not able to approach Ephron directly? And what can we learn from these detailed nuances in the text? In this session, through a careful reading of the text and commentaries related to the text, we will begin to answer these questions.

Opening Activity (15 minutes)

Welcome participants and, if they do not know each other, ask them to introduce themselves.

Explain to participants that today we will be studying a Torah portion that goes to great lengths to include each and every detail regarding the purchase of land to be used as a place of burial. Tell participants that this type of lengthy description is rare in Torah, and that its inclusion in the text is significant for more than one reason. In looking carefully at the text, we will attempt to determine the significance of the details provided in the text.

Ask participants to divide into groups of two (or three, if necessary). In turns, ask each participant to share with his or her partner what they did on Thursday of this week, using as little detail as possible. Once each participant has had a chance to share with his or her partner, ask them to again describe their day on Thursday, this time using as many details as possible. Once all participants have had a chance to share, discuss this exercise with the group, using the following guide questions:

- When you listened to the accounts of your partner's day on Thursday, which of the two accounts was easier to understand? Which was more interesting?

- When you were discussing your day, did you find it difficult to tell your story without details?

Was it difficult to tell the story with many details?

- What purpose do details serve in the telling of a story?

Read the Text (20 minutes)

Give each participant a copy of the participant handout. Ask a member of the group to read Genesis, chapter 23, aloud and then summarize it for the group. Discuss the following with participants:

- What is your initial reaction to the text? Does anything strike you about this text?
- What questions does this text raise for you?
- What is the focus of this text?
- Why do you think the text goes to such great lengths to provide a detailed account of the transaction?
- Why might Abraham have needed the townspeople to intercede with Ephron on his behalf?
- Why do you think Abraham was so concerned with legitimately buying the cave when Ephron was willing to simply give it to him?

Tell participants that scholars, too, have asked these questions about the text. Several commentaries discuss the significance of the details in this text, as well as the nuances present therein. By studying what some of these commentators have to say, we will come to a greater understanding of the purpose behind this rare treatment of details in Torah.

An Entire Chapter (10 minutes)

Direct participants to the section in the participant handout entitled, “An Entire Chapter.” Tell participants that the quotation we will focus on in this section is the last one, from Genesis *Rabbah*. In order to understand this quotation, however, we first need to learn about three instances in

Torah related to the purchase of land. The first is the text we just read, Genesis 23. We will also look at another text from Genesis and one from 1 Chronicles.

Ask a member of the group to read the text from 1 Chronicles aloud and summarize it for the group. Explain to the group that this text is recounting the purchase of the very land on which the *Beit haMikdash* once stood. In this text, we learn that David bought and paid for a threshing floor (a flat surface on which one would separate the edible parts of grain from the inedible parts) belonging to a man named Ornan, fair and square. This purchase is an important one because of the historical significance the site holds for the Jewish people.

Ask a different member of the group to read the text from Genesis 33 (verses 18-19) and summarize it for the group. In this text, we learn that Joseph buys a plot of land from the children of Hamor in a place called Shechem. This purchase takes place right after his reunion with Esau and later, Joseph is buried in this very spot. Here again, we see that the land was bought and paid for, fair and square.

The final quotation in this section, the text from Genesis *Rabbah*, brings these three instances together in order to explain the significance of detailing the acquisition of these various places. Ask a member of the group to read the quotation aloud and summarize it for the group. Discuss the quotation with participants, using the following guide questions:

- Why do you think the *midrash* quotes these three verses specifically? What is the significance of these particular purchases? (*All three of these sites later became very significant to the Jewish people – the burial place of the matriarchs and patriarchs, the site of the Holy Temple and the burial place of Joseph. These three examples are used because of their historical significance.*)
- Genesis *Rabbah* suggests that the details of these three purchases are recorded so that the nations of the world cannot accuse Israel of stealing them. Why is this important? (*Recording the purchases of these sites in this way serves as a sort of deed of property or a public record of*

the purchase, showing that we legitimately own the property. This is important because we do not want the original owners to attempt to take the property back. Also, as we know, there is much dispute over these sites in modern times.)

The quotation from *Genesis Rabbah* leads us to believe that a detailed record of these purchases is included in the text so that other nations are not able to say that the Israelites stole these sites. These three land acquisitions are mentioned because of their historical (and perhaps religious) significance to the Jewish people. *Genesis Rabbah* here shows the importance not only of the sites, but also of recording significant purchases of the Jewish people that might later be contested.

One More Time (15 minutes)

Ask participants to read the text of Genesis 23 again, this time underlining or circling each instance that the name of the place is mentioned. Participants should come up with seven instances (the qualification, “now Hebron” is not counted as a separate instance) – two in verse 1 (Kiriath-arba, the land of Canaan), two in verse 17 (in Machpelah, near Mamre) and three in verse 19 (field of Machpelah, facing Mamre, the land of Canaan). Obviously, the text takes great pains to ensure that we know where the burial site is. Ask participants: why do you think determining the exact location of the place is important?

Direct participants to the section in the participant handout entitled, “One More Time.” Explain to the participants that we are not only curious why we have an entire chapter detailing the purchase of a burial site, but more specifically, we wonder why we have such repetition of the name of the place, particularly in verse 19, where it is mentioned a full three times.

Together with the whole group, read and summarize each quotation in turn and focus on the following guide questions for each text:

- Ibn Ezra (“After the burial of Sarah...”)

- Ibn Ezra suggests that the name of the place is repeated three times in this verse for two specific reasons. What are they? *(The importance and superiority of the land of Israel and the fact that the purchase of the land is the first step in fulfilling God's covenant with Abraham, in which Abraham is promised land.)*
- Do you agree with Ibn Ezra's claim that the land of Israel is superior to other lands? Why or why not?
- Do you think that the purchase of this burial site is really related to the covenant with Abraham? Why or why not?
- If the purchase of this land was, in part, a fulfillment of the covenant made between God and Abraham, why do you think the Israelites still had to fight for the land after their wanderings in the desert? Why did God not reserve the land for the children of Israel?
- Ramban ("Scripture reverts to clarify...")
 - Ramban begins his comment by dealing with the language in the verse. Ramban sees the detailed language of verse 19 as strange and wonders why the verse appears the way it does. What reason does Ramban give for the repetition of the name of the place? *(The text wants to make it very clear that Sarah died in Canaan, which later becomes Israel, and that she was buried there. Ramban is discussing geography and alluding to the sense of deep attachment to the land of Israel.)*
 - Ramban suggests that the reason it is important to repeat the name of the place is not only to clarify that Sarah died in the land of Israel, but also so that future generations know where the patriarchs are buried. This information is necessary so that we can "honor the burial place of our holy ancestors." What does it mean to honor a burial

place? Why is it important? Is there a difference between honoring a burial place and honoring the dead?

- Ramban ends his quotation by responding to Ibn Ezra's comment, which we just read.

What are Ramban's issues with Ibn Ezra's interpretation of the verse? (*Ramban says that there is no evidence in the text that the land is special, only that it is purchased.*

Also, he points out that the land of Israel was not acquired through Abraham's purchase of the cave, but rather through the conquest of a later generation of Israelites –

Abraham's seed. Therefore, Ramban does not feel that this particular purchase can, in any way, be related to the covenant.)

These two commentators give us very different (and even conflicting) explanations for the repetition of the name of the place in the text. Ask participants: which interpretation do you agree with? Why? If you do not agree with either interpretation, why do you think the name of the place is mentioned so many times?

I Can't Do It Alone (15 minutes)

Tell participants that there is one more aspect of this text that is peculiar. Abraham, in verse 8, asks the townspeople to intercede with Ephron on his behalf. It seems strange that Abraham would not be able to simply go and talk to Ephron himself, especially since we learn in verse 10 that Ephron is in the crowd of townspeople. Direct participants to the section in the participant handout entitled, "I Can't Do It Alone." Ask participants to divide themselves into *chevruta* groups and read the two quotations in this section, focusing on what the commentators have to say about why Abraham had to ask the townspeople to intercede with Ephron.

When participants have finished reading and discussing the texts, bring the group back together. Taking each text in turn, ask participants to share what each text says about Abraham's need for an intermediary. In particular, focus on the following from each text:

- Ramban (“The intent thereof is...”)
 - The tone of the address from Ephron is such that it is clear that the negotiation is not really about money at all, but about social standing. Ephron seems to say, “We are both rich men, why bother with a mere 400 shekels (which, by the way, was quite a large sum of money in those days)?” From this statement by Ephron we can derive that he is a rich and honored man and that Abraham, in asking for an intermediary, is respecting his place in the community.
 - Ramban refers to a story in I Kings 21 in which Ahab wants to buy the vineyard of Naboth, who refuses to sell it to him. Naboth does not want to sell his land because it is his ancestral inheritance. In this story, Jezebel, Ahab’s wife, has two people falsely swear that Naboth cursed God, framing him so that he would be stoned to death. Once he was out of the picture, Ahab, as king, would have full rights to the vineyard.
 - In bringing this story into his comment, Ramban shows the importance of land ownership, in particular that of an ancestral inheritance. Ramban assumes that the land in question is Ephron’s ancestral inheritance and, therefore, that it would not be in Ephron’s best interest to sell it to Abraham.
 - If we assume that the land is Ephron’s ancestral inheritance, in asking him to sell it, Abraham is doing something he should not be doing. Abraham has an immediate need for a burial site, however, so makes this humanitarian appeal through the townspeople, so that they will all be aware that Ephron did not lightly give up the land of his inheritance.
- Seforno (“that he will sell me this cave...”)
 - Like Ramban, Seforno says that Abraham asks the people to intercede because it was not an accepted custom for a “highly placed person” to sell any part of his land.

- Seforno implies that Abraham asks the townspeople to intercede so that neither Abraham nor Ephron is looked at in a different light after the sale.

Though the text does not mention this, Ramban and Seforno maintain that Abraham's request to Ephron to sell his land would, under normal circumstances, be unreasonable and even disrespectful. By first asking the townspeople to intercede on his behalf, Abraham shows humility and treats the situation in an appropriate and respectful manner. Abraham, though he is a rich and powerful man, does not throw his weight around to get what he wants. Instead, he simply asks the townspeople to intercede on his behalf, effecting for himself a positive outcome – the acquisition of a burial place for his wife and, as we learn at the end of this portion, for himself.

Concluding Activity (15 minutes)

As we have seen, many fascinating and important discussions can come from a close reading of this text. One could talk about the importance of land in Jewish tradition, the importance of recording the purchase of the land (and even how that plays out in modern times, as the ownership of the same land is still hotly debated), the importance of honoring the dead (an important value in Judaism) and the importance of handling delicate situations respectfully and appropriately. What has not yet been mentioned is that in purchasing this burial site, Abraham also secures his own burial site and that of the rest of the matriarchs and patriarchs. The purchase of this land has as much importance for Sarah as it does for Abraham. Discuss the following with participants:

- When a loved one dies, it often falls upon those who are living to make the necessary arrangements for burial. Is that what Abraham is doing here? How do you know?
- In addition to looking for a place to bury Sarah, is it possible that Abraham was planning for the time in which he, too, would need to be buried? How do you know?
- Is it important to secure a burial site for oneself during one's life? Why or why not?

- In some ways, this story shows us the importance of planning ahead, so that all of our affairs are in order before we die. What does this mean? What types of “affairs” are meant to be “in order”? In addition to having a burial site, what else do we need to plan for before we die?
- As we know, this text goes into great detail about Abraham’s purchase of the burial plot. As we think about our own deaths, how much detail do we give our loved ones about our wishes? Is it necessary to give explicit detail about these wishes to our loved ones? Why or why not?

Thank participants for coming and remind them that in purchasing the site at which he will ultimately be buried, this story of Abraham forces us to think about a hard and often uncomfortable matter. Where will we be buried when we die? Have we set aside money for the purchase of a casket or will our loved ones deal with that once we have passed? What will happen to our money and belongings? Though these questions are difficult to consider and even more difficult to discuss with our loved ones, it is of the utmost importance that we have these discussions while we are still able. All too often, the wishes of the deceased are not followed because they are not known. Members of families have stopped speaking to each other due to confusion about the deceased’s wishes and differences of opinion about the same. As hard as it may be, it is up to us to plan for our own deaths. May we all learn from the example of Abraham and help our loved ones to avoid unnecessary pain by ensuring that all of our affairs are in order. In this way, our loved ones can concentrate on their grief and the special memories they will always hold of the time we spent together.

פרשת חיי שרה

Parashat Chayei Sarah

Participant Handout

Genesis, Chapter 23

¹ Sarah's lifetime -- the span of Sarah's life -- came to one hundred and twenty-seven years. ² Sarah died in Kiriath-arba -- now Hebron -- in the land of Canaan; and Abraham proceeded to mourn for Sarah and to bewail her. ³ Then Abraham rose from beside his dead, and spoke to the Hittites, saying, ⁴ "I am a resident alien among you; sell me a burial site among you, that I may remove my dead for burial." ⁵ And the Hittites replied to Abraham, saying to him, ⁶ "Hear us, my lord: you are the elect of God among us. Bury your dead in the choicest of our burial places; none of us will withhold his burial place from you for burying your dead." ⁷ Thereupon Abraham bowed low to the people of the land, the Hittites, ⁸ and he said to them, "If it is your wish that I remove my dead for burial, you must agree to intercede for me with Ephron son of Zohar. ⁹ Let him sell me the cave of Machpelah that he owns, which is at the edge of his land. Let him sell it to me, at the full price, for a burial site in your midst." ¹⁰ Ephron was present among the Hittites; so Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham in the hearing of the Hittites, all who entered the gate of his town, saying, ¹¹ "No, my lord, hear me: I give you the field and I give you the cave that is in it; I give it to you in the presence of my people. Bury your dead." ¹² Then Abraham bowed low before the people of the land, ¹³ and spoke to Ephron in the hearing of the people of the land, saying, "If only you would hear me out! Let me pay the price of the land; accept it from me, that I may bury my dead there." ¹⁴ And Ephron replied to Abraham, saying to him, ¹⁵ "My lord, do hear me! A piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver -- what is that between you and me? Go and bury your dead." ¹⁶ Abraham accepted Ephron's terms. Abraham paid out to Ephron the money that he had named in the hearing of the Hittites -- four hundred shekels of silver at the going merchants' rate. ¹⁷ So Ephron's land in Machpelah, near Mamre -- the field with its cave and all the trees anywhere within the confines of that field -- passed ¹⁸ to Abraham as his possession, in the presence of the Hittites, of all who entered the gate of his town. ¹⁹ And then Abraham buried his wife Sarah in the cave of the field of Machpelah, facing Mamre -- now Hebron -- in the land of Canaan. ²⁰ Thus the field with its cave passed from the Hittites to Abraham, as a burial site.

An Entire Chapter

²² David said to Ornan, "Sell me the site of the threshing floor, that I may build on it an altar to the LORD. Sell it to me at the full price, that the plague against the people will be checked." ²³ Ornan said to David, "Take it and let my lord the king do whatever he sees fit. See, I donate oxen for burnt offerings, and the threshing boards for wood, as well as wheat for a meal offering -- I donate all of it." ²⁴ But King David replied to Ornan, "No, I will buy them at the full price. I cannot make a present to the LORD of what belongs to you, or sacrifice a burnt offering that has cost me nothing." ²⁵ So David paid Ornan for the site 600 shekels' worth of gold.

1 Chronicles 21:22-25

¹⁸ Jacob arrived safe in the city of Shechem which is in the land of Canaan -- having come thus from Paddan-aram -- and he encamped before the city. ¹⁹ The parcel of land where he pitched his tent he purchased from the children of Hamor, Shechem's father, for a hundred kesitahs.

Genesis 33:18-19

THE PARCEL OF LAND...HE PURCHASED, etc. (Gen. 33:19). R. Judan b. R. Simon said: This is one of the three places regarding which the nations of the world cannot taunt Israel and say, 'Ye have stolen them.' These are they: The cave of Machpelah, the [site of the] Temple, and the sepulcher of Joseph. The cave of Machpelah: *Abraham paid out to Ephron the money* (Gen. 23:16). The Temple: *So David paid Ornan for the site six hundred shekels worth of gold* (1 Chron. 21:25). And Joseph's sepulcher: THE PARCEL OF LAND...HE PURCHASED.

Genesis *Rabbah* 79:7

One More Time

AND THEN ABRAHAM BURIED HIS WIFE SARAH. After the burial of Sarah the field was made sure as a burial ground possession belonging to Abraham and his descendants. Scripture tells of the purchase of the field of Machpelah to teach us of the superiority of the land of Israel over all countries, both for the living and the dead. Moreover, it informs us that God's word to Abraham that he would possess the land as an inheritance was fulfilled.

Ibn Ezra on Gen. 23:19

AND THEN ABRAHAM BURIED HIS WIFE SARAH IN THE CAVE OF THE FIELD OF MACHPELAH, FACING MAMRE — NOW HEBRON — IN THE LAND OF CANAAN. ...Scripture reverts to clarify the field, the place and the land... Scripture mentions at the conclusion that the field was in the land of Canaan which is the land of Israel. And so it said at the beginning of the section: *in Kiryath arba — now*

Hebron — in the land of Canaan. All this is to explain that the righteous woman died in the land of Israel, and there she was interred...

In my opinion, the reason for the verses is only to mention that this was the land of Canaan, not the land of the Philistines.

...Further, Scripture wanted to inform us of the place of the burial of the patriarchs since we are obligated to honor the burial place of our holy ancestors.

...I do not know a reason for the words of Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra, who says that the purpose of this section is to let us know the superiority of the land of Israel as regards the living and the dead, and also to fulfill the word of God which promised him that the land would be an inheritance of his. But what superiority of the land was thus demonstrated? Abraham would not have carried her to another land to bury her, and the word of God to Abraham applied to the whole land, and that was fulfilled only with his seed.

Ramban on Gen. 23:19

I Can't Do It Alone

IF IT IS YOUR WISH THAT I REMOVE MY DEAD FOR BURIAL. The intent thereof is: "I will not bury my dead in another burial ground. However if it be your desire that I bury my dead, entreat for me to Ephron who has a cave at the end of his field, which is not used as his family burial-place but as a field." The meaning of the word *milphanai*, ([literally,] from before me [here translated as, for burial]), is that if you will not do so I will entomb her in a casket. It may be that it means "my dead wife who is before me, and as an obligation I must hurry to bury her." The reason Abraham requested, *intercede for me*, is that Ephron was a rich and distinguished person, as is indicated by his saying, *What is that between you and me?* It would therefore not be to his honor to sell his ancestral inheritance, as was the case with Naboth of Jezreel. It was for this reason that Abraham did not go to Ephron to offer him an inflated price for the field, but instead he asked of the people of the city to entreat to him [Ephron] on his behalf in an honorable way.

Ramban on Gen. 23:8

INTERCEDE FOR ME WITH EPHRON that he will sell me this cave even though it is not an agreeable thing for a highly placed person to sell any portion of his land-holdings. We know this from Navot (Kings I 21:3) who had been aghast at the suggestion of selling his vineyard to the king. His precise words were: "*far be it from me to give you any part of my ancestral heritage.*"

Seforno on Gen. 23:8

פרשת תולדות

Parashat Toledot

Genesis 25:19 – 28:9

Synopsis

In the beginning of *Parashat Toledot*, forty-year-old Isaac takes Rebekah as a wife. Rebekah remains barren for some time and Isaac prays on her behalf. Eventually, she conceives twins, who struggle in her womb. She asks God about this and is told that she will give birth to two nations and that the elder child will serve the younger. When Isaac is sixty, Rebekah gives birth to twins. The first child emerges red and hairy and is named Esau. The second comes out holding onto the heel of the first and is named Jacob. While Esau grows up to be a skillful hunter, Jacob remains in the camp. Rebekah favors Jacob, but Isaac likes his meat and, therefore, Esau is his favorite. One day, Jacob is in the midst of cooking a stew when Esau comes home famished. Esau asks Jacob for some of the stew, but Jacob first asks Esau to sell him his birthright. Esau, starving, agrees to give Jacob his birthright and Jacob gives Esau the stew.

A famine comes over the land, and at God's command, Isaac moves his family to Gerar. Like his father (see *Lech L'cha* and *Vayeira*), Isaac tells the men of Gerar that Rebekah is his sister, hoping that will keep him alive. After some time, King Abimelech sees Isaac fondling Rebekah and realizes that she is his wife, not his sister. Abimelech forbids anyone from molesting either Rebekah or Isaac. Isaac is blessed by God and becomes very wealthy. Jealous, the Philistines stop up all of the wells built during the days of Abraham, and Isaac is asked to leave. Isaac does so and on his journey builds and names new wells. When he is in Beer-sheba, God appears to him and he builds another well and an altar to God. Abimelech comes to him seeking a treaty of peace, which Isaac accepts. At forty, Esau takes two wives; Isaac and Rebekah do not approve of them.

When Isaac is old and blind, he calls Esau to him and asks him to go out and hunt, prepare a meal and return to Isaac so that Esau may receive a blessing. Rebekah overhears this request and

tells Jacob what she heard. She instructs Jacob to bring her two choice kids and she makes a meal to Isaac's liking. Rebekah dresses Jacob in Esau's best clothes and covers his hands and neck with the hairy skins of the kids. She hands Jacob the dish and he goes in to see his father. Jacob pretends to be Esau and serves Isaac the meal. Thinking he is Esau, Isaac blesses Jacob with the blessing of the first-born. Jacob leaves Isaac's presence and Esau returns from his hunt, prepares a meal and brings it to his father. When Isaac realizes what has happened, he trembles violently and explains to Esau that Jacob stole his blessing. Esau is furious and upset and asks his father to bless him as well. Isaac blesses Esau, who holds a grudge against Jacob and decides to kill him after Isaac's death. Rebekah finds out about Esau's plan and tells Jacob to flee. Isaac blesses Jacob again and tells him not to take a wife from among the Canaanites, but rather from the daughters of Laban, Rebekah's brother. Jacob sets off to find his wife and Esau, seeing that Canaanite women were displeasing to Isaac, took another wife, this one the daughter of Ishmael, the son of Abraham.

Central Text(s)

- Genesis, chapter 25, verses 27-34

Essential Questions

- Why does Torah find it necessary to tell us that Isaac favors Esau and Rebekah favors Jacob?
- Why do you think it is or is not okay for parents to favor a particular child?
- Why is Jacob so interested in getting the birthright from Esau?
- What do you think about the way in which Jacob obtained the birthright?
- Why was Esau so willing to part with his birthright for a meal?

Materials Needed

- Participant Handouts (one for each participant)

Session Plan

Introduction:

As we have learned (see *parashat Chayei Sarah*), each letter, word and phrase in Torah is significant and has meaning. This is true when words or phrases are repeated and it is just as true when details and flowery language are spared. Just because a story is told concisely does not make it any less significant or important. (In fact, the story of Isaac, who clearly plays a very significant role in the history of the Jewish people, is told in three chapters, where the story of Joseph, who is not a patriarch, comprises fourteen chapters!) In just eight verses near the beginning of *Parashat Toledot*, a story is recounted that changes (or seals) the fate and history of the Jewish people forever.

In the womb, Jacob and Esau are already fighting. Legend has it that whenever the pregnant Rebekah walked near idols, Esau pushed to come out, and whenever she walked near a *Beit Midrash* (House of Study), Isaac pushed to come out. They argued about the value of material wealth and the afterlife. They argued about who would be born first. Some even say that the dispute over the birthright began in the womb.¹¹ These legends foreshadow the themes that recur throughout the story of the lives of Jacob and Esau – jealousy, rivalry, favoritism and deceit.

Sibling rivalry is fairly commonplace and it is not overly surprising that Esau and Jacob would compete with each other for their parents' affections. What is surprising is that Isaac and Rebekah very clearly take sides in the rivalry. What's more, Torah clearly states which parent loves which child more. Why does Torah find it necessary to make this statement? Does this mean that it is permissible for a parent to favor a particular child? If not, what is the purpose of the statement?

In these eight verses, we also learn that Jacob acquires Esau's birthright. Commentators disagree about whether the birthright was obtained through trickery, but it is clear that Jacob takes advantage of a weakened Esau who might not be thinking straight. Why is Jacob so intent on getting the birthright? Are the means he uses to acquire the birthright those befitting a righteous man? And

¹¹ *The Legends of the Jews*, p. 252

why is Esau so willing to part with what is rightfully his? Finally, what can we learn from this story of Jacob and Esau?

Opening Activity (15 minutes)

Welcome participants and, if they do not know each other, ask them to introduce themselves.

Explain to participants that this session will focus on a story about Jacob and Esau that has a lot to say about familial relationships. Certainly the ideal of these relationships is that they are filled with love, support and understanding, but the reality is that this is not always the case. This story of Jacob and Esau tells explicitly of parents who favor a particular child and of sibling rivals who engage in what appears to be improper behavior to get what they want. The question is: does Torah condone this behavior by telling the story? Or is the story meant to teach us a lesson about what not to do?

Though perhaps not all participants are parents (though all have been children of parents and have, therefore, witnessed how parents treat their children), it is likely that all participants have been in some situation or another in which they have favored a certain family member or desired something another family member had. Perhaps a parent favored one child or a child favored one parent. Perhaps a sibling or friend had something another sibling or friend desired. Ask participants to take a moment to think of a time in their lives when they have been in this type of situation. Ask any participants who wish to share their story with the group to do so, using the following guide questions:

- What were the circumstances of the situation?
- What was it that caused you to favor one person over the other? Or, what was it that the other person had that you desired?
- Were the people in question aware of your favoritism or your desire for the thing or object?
- How did you feel after the situation played out?

- Was your relationship with any of the people changed permanently as a result of the situation?

As mentioned, both of these situations play out with Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob and Esau in *parashat Toledot*. By taking a close look at the text itself, as well as various commentators' interpretations of the text, it is possible to gain a greater understanding of what Torah aims to teach in the telling of these stories.

Read the Text (10 minutes)

Give each participant a copy of the participant handout. Ask a member of the group to read Genesis, chapter 25, verses 27-34, aloud and then summarize it for the group. Discuss the following with participants:

- What is your initial reaction to the text? What strikes you about this text?
- What questions does this text raise for you?
- The text states explicitly why Isaac favored Esau, but the reason for Rebekah's favoring of Isaac is not explicitly mentioned. What might be the reason for Rebekah's favoritism?
- Why do you think Jacob wanted the birthright?
- Why was Esau so quick to give Jacob the birthright?
- Why, after the story is told, do you think the text finds it necessary to point out that Esau spurned the birthright?

Tell participants that in these eight short verses, we are able to learn some very important lessons about family life. For centuries, commentators have sought to answer the questions we just discussed and determine Torah's purpose in telling the stories. We will now look closely at two issues this text brings up – first, the issue of favoritism and second, the issue of the birthright.

Playing Favorites (25 minutes)

Direct participants to the section in the participant handout entitled, "Playing Favorites." As previously mentioned, the text tells us explicitly why Isaac favors Esau, but does not explain why

Rebekah favors Jacob. Neither does the text discuss Isaac's feelings toward Jacob or Rebekah's feelings toward Esau. The commentary, however, does have some insight into the questions the text itself leaves unanswered. Together with the group, read the texts aloud and then summarize them.

Discuss the texts using the following guide questions:

- Kimchi ("There was no need...")
 - Kimchi suggests that Isaac loved Jacob as well, but that the Torah does not find it necessary to mention this, as it should be obvious. Why does Kimchi suggest that it is obvious that Isaac loved Jacob? *(Because Jacob was a righteous man, he was not only deserving of Isaac's love, but also received his love.)*
 - Kimchi further suggests that Esau gained his father's love only because Esau brought Isaac venison when he hunted. What do you think about this assertion? Is it possible that Isaac loved his son for only this reason?
- R'dak ("Isaac undoubtedly loved...")
 - *(Reminder: R'dak is another name for Kimchi. While the comment above relates to Isaac's love for the twins, this one discusses Rebekah's feelings.)*
 - In this text, Kimchi suggests that Rebekah loved only Jacob. What does Kimchi say is the reason that Rebekah loves only Jacob? *(Kimchi suggests that Rebekah loves only Jacob because he has chosen a life of righteousness, where Esau has chosen a path that almost certainly leads to death. What's more, Esau is rash and wild, qualities that Rebekah seems to dislike.)*
 - Do you believe that it is possible for a mother to love only one of her two children? Why or why not?
- Shaloh ("Isaac's love was a love...")

- This comment suggests that Isaac's love for Esau is temporary, while Rebekah's love for Jacob is permanent. It is said that the tense of the Hebrew verbs indicate this difference. The verb used for Isaac's love is in the past tense, while the verb used for Rebekah's love is in the present tense. Is this enough evidence for you to agree with this assessment? Why or why not?
- This text says nothing about Isaac's love for Jacob or Rebekah's love for Esau. Based on the logic in this text, what are your thoughts about Isaac's feelings for Jacob and Rebekah's feelings for Esau? Do you think these feelings are temporary or eternal? Why?

The comments we have just read expound on the feelings Isaac and Rebekah had for Jacob and Esau. What they lack is a treatment of whether favoritism of parents is acceptable according to the standards of Judaism. The final three quotations in this section deal with just this issue. Ask participants: based on what you know about Judaism, would you say that favoritism is acceptable? Why or why not?

Ask a member of the group to read the final three quotations in this section. Ask participants if these quotations confirm or dispute their thoughts about what Judaism has to say about favoritism of parents? Discuss the following with participants:

- Why do these texts suggest that favoritism among parents is undesirable? *(It has the potential to cause strife among siblings, the consequences of such favoritism could impact several generations and children can surprise parents and defy expectations.)*
- These texts clearly show that parental favoritism is undesirable. What, then, do you think is the purpose of Torah's inclusion of this information in the story?

- Is it possible that this story is meant to teach us a lesson? If so, what are we meant to learn?

Does this story give us a positive or a negative example? Is it possible to learn effectively from a negative example?

- If you could rewrite Torah in order to teach a lesson regarding favoritism, how would you write it? What lesson would you strive to teach? How would you teach the lesson?

Mine, Mine, Mine! (30 minutes)

Direct participants to the section in the participant handout entitled, “Mine, Mine, Mine!”

Remind participants that the text we read from Genesis, chapter 25, tells two stories. The first is that of Isaac and Rebekah’s favoritism and the second is that of the rivalry between Jacob and Esau. We have discussed the issues of favoritism in the first part of the text and we will now focus on the issues of rivalry present in the second.

While the rivalry between Jacob and Esau runs much deeper than only the birthright, this episode seems to pit the brothers even further against each other. The telling of the story, however, is short and simple. It offers no judgment of either character, though each acts in a way that is shady and perhaps even inappropriate. The commentators seek to fill in the gaps in the story and help us to learn important lessons about families and siblings.

Together with the whole group, read and summarize each quotation in turn and focus on the following guide questions for each text:

- Kimchi (“The purpose of this story...”)
 - Kimchi suggests that this story is told so that the reader is able to see the vast differences between Jacob and Esau. Do you agree with Kimchi? If so, why? If not, why do you think this story is told?
 - Kimchi says that one of the differences between Jacob and Esau is their view on the “physical gratifications available on earth.” What is the view of each? (*Jacob is*

unconcerned with these gratifications, while they are all that Esau can think about.) How do you think this is relevant to the story? (Jacob's concern is with the birthright and all Esau can think about is eating. This explains why Esau was so quick to give up his rightful inheritance.)

- The Chumash: The Stone Edition ("God's blessing to Abraham...")
 - This text seeks to explain why Jacob is so intent on receiving the birthright. The author suggests that Jacob wants the birthright so that it is he who receives Torah and becomes the final Patriarch of the Jewish people. Why might Jacob have wanted to be the next patriarch?
 - Is it possible that Jacob was aware of what receiving the birthright would mean for his future and that of the Jewish people? Why or why not?
- Rashi ("Since the [sacrificial] service...")
 - Rashi offers another explanation for why Jacob wanted to receive the birthright. Rashi suggests that Jacob felt he was more suited to the sacrificial service than Esau.
 - Do you agree with The Chumash: The Stone Edition or Rashi? Why? If you do not agree with either, why do you think Jacob was so intent on receiving the birthright?
- Seforno ("Seeing that as of now...")
 - Seforno supports Rashi's opinion and takes it further by saying that Jacob pushes Esau to give the birthright because it is so obvious that he will not be able to fulfill the related duties. Why do you think Seforno is of the opinion that Esau cannot perform the necessary duties of the firstborn?
 - What do you think it says about Jacob's character that he thinks he is better suited to the duties of the firstborn than Esau, the actual firstborn? What do you think it says about Esau's character?

- Do you agree with Seforno's assessment? Why or why not?
- The Torah: Portion by Portion ("The Torah explains...")
 - This author says that Esau sells his birthright because he is hungry at that moment. The far-reaching consequences of his decision never enter his mind. Do you agree with this statement? Does the text itself indicate that Esau thought thoroughly about what he was doing?
 - Though it is not stated explicitly, this text implies that Jacob is concerned about the far-reaching consequences of his acquisition of the birthright. Do you agree with this? Why or why not?
- Kimchi ("Even after he had eaten...")
 - When reading the text of Genesis, chapter 25, verses 27-34, one cannot help but wonder whether Jacob acquired the birthright in a fair way. Here, Kimchi says that Esau, even after he was sated, did not feel tricked. Can we, therefore, conclude that Jacob's means were appropriate? Why or why not?
- The Chumash: The Stone Edition ("This sums up...")
 - This comment is quite decisive about Jacob's means. This commentator clearly believes that Esau was treated fairly and is responsible for his own decision. Do you agree with this? Why or why not?
 - This comment further suggests that Esau sold the birthright because it was meaningless to him under any circumstances. Do Esau's actions in the story support this view? Why? If not, why do you think Esau parted with the birthright?
- Sarna ("Our sympathy with Esau...")
 - Sarna indicates that a reader might feel sympathetic to Esau during the first part of the story, but at the end, with the statement, "Thus did Esau spurn the birthright," all

sympathy is lost. Sarna suggests that these are the inner feelings of Esau. What do you think Esau was feeling during the transaction and after? What might Jacob's feelings have been?

- Sarna also points out that once the agreement is made, Esau goes about his business and does not reconsider his decision. From this, are we to believe that Esau really found the meal more important than the birthright? Why or why not?

The commentators' interpretations of this story suggest that not only were Jacob's means appropriate, but that he was more suited to the birthright and its related responsibilities. By his behavior, Esau indicates that he has no concern for the birthright or anything related, and that he is concerned only with his next meal. So, even though Jacob approaches Esau at a time of weakness, tradition clearly feels that the transaction is appropriate and valid.

Concluding Activity (10 minutes)

Though our story is told in eight short verses, it has much to teach about familial relationships. Isaac and Rebekah's grossly different treatment of each of their sons serves only to perpetuate the rivalry already in existence between them. Jacob's bizarre acquisition of the birthright and Esau's seeming disinterest in the entire affair highlight the differences in the personalities of the twins, as well as the differences in their life priorities. One thing, however, is certain: the text portrays Jacob as a righteous and upstanding person, while Esau is portrayed as a brute whose only concerns are hunting and eating. If that is, in fact, the case, it is hardly surprising that Jacob receives not only the birthright, but also the blessing, and eventually becomes the final patriarch of the Jewish people.

Even so, this story gives us cause to think about our own familial relationships. Discuss the following with participants:

- What can we learn from the interactions between Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob and Esau?
- What can we do to prevent favoritism in our relationships?

- If we find ourselves favoring one person over another, how can we prevent these feelings from informing our actions?
- How can we avoid rivalry within our families?
- When there are vast differences of character or priority, what can we do to be supportive of those differences (rather than shun them)?
- If favoritism or rivalries occur, what can we do to prevent the repercussions from negatively affecting our relationships?

Thank participants for coming and remind them that being part of a family is not always easy. For all of the love and laughter, there is also pain and hardship. There are times when families have differences of opinion and when family members find themselves with priorities that differ. Though love and support should always be at the forefront of family life, it is at these times of difference that we need each other's love and support the most. As members of a family, we are not only individuals, but also part of a group, and we must always think critically and deeply about how our actions, characteristics and priorities will affect ourselves and our families. By seeking to understand each other and always communicating openly, by offering love and support no matter how hard it may be, we can avoid favoritism, jealousy, rivalry and deceit in our own relationships.

פרשת תולדות

Parashat Toledot

Participant Handout

Genesis, Chapter 25, Verses 27-34

²⁷ When the boys grew up, Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the outdoors; but Jacob was a mild man who stayed in camp. ²⁸ Isaac favored Esau because he had a taste for game; but Rebekah favored Jacob. ²⁹ Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the open, famished. ³⁰ And Esau said to Jacob, "Give me some of that red stuff to gulp down, for I am famished" -- which is why he was named Edom. ³¹ Jacob said, "First sell me your birthright." ³² And Esau said, "I am at the point of death, so of what use is my birthright to me?" ³³ But Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. ³⁴ Jacob then gave Esau bread and lentil stew; he ate and drank, and he rose and went away. Thus did Esau spurn the birthright.

Playing Favorites

[ISAAC] FAVORED [ESAU]. There was no need to mention that Isaac loved [Jacob]; clearly his love for Jacob was constantly on the increase seeing that Jacob was righteous, etc. Esau's claim to his father's love was due only to the venison he brought his father from his hunting expeditions.

Kimchi on Gen. 25:28

ISAAC FAVORED ESAU...Rebecca...loved only Jacob because he followed the way of life and Esau the way of death, for not only did Esau not engage in wisdom and in the ways of God, but he chose an occupation that put him in constant danger, and he was rash and wild.

R'dak on Gen. 25:28, as quoted in *Judaica Press Books of the Bible*:

The Book of Genesis, vol. 2, pp. 309a-309b

ISAAC FAVORED ESAU BECAUSE HE HAD A TASTE FOR GAME; BUT REBEKAH FAVORED JACOB. Isaac's love was a love dependent on an external factor, BECAUSE HE HAD A TASTE FOR GAME. Of such a love, we are told, once the external factor disappears, the love disappears as well. It therefore states that ISAAC FAVORED (note the past tense) ESAU. Rebekah, on the other hand, loved Jacob without any external factor being the cause of her love. Such a love remains forever. Thus here the Torah uses the form *ohvet*, which[, in the Hebrew] is in the present, continuous tense, to signify that Rebekah's love for Jacob was an eternal one.

Shaloh, as quoted in *Torah Gems*, vol. 1 p. 204

Rav said: A man should not single out one of his sons for special treatment, for on account of the two *sela* of silk [the coat of many colors] – the one thing Jacob gave to Joseph and not to his other sons – Joseph's brothers grew jealous of him, and the consequences grew until our forebears had to go down into Egypt.

Shabbat 10b, as quoted in *Book of Legends: Sefer Ha-Aggadah*, section 260, p. 637

One should show no favoritism among his children.

Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, as quoted in *The Hasidic Anthology*, p. 45

Love equally all your children. Sometimes the favored disappoint, and the neglected make you happy.

Berekiah Ha-Nakdan, Mishle Shualim, as quoted in

A Torah Commentary for Our Times, p. 67

Mine, Mine, Mine!

[ONCE WHEN JACOB] WAS COOKING. The purpose of this story being recorded in the Torah is in order to contrast Jacob's virtues with Esau's irresponsible way of looking at life. Not only that, but Esau was what our sages call a glutton. Jacob, on the other hand, was so little concerned with the physical gratifications available on earth that when cooking for himself, he cooked a dish of lentils, the simplest undistinguished vegetable.

Kimchi on Gen. 25:29

God's blessing to Abraham specified that only one of Isaac's children would be heir to the mission of Israel (see *Rambam, Hil. Melachim* 10:7), meaning that Torah would go to Jacob or Esau, but not to both. This explains Jacob's intense desire to "purchase" the birthright.

The Chumash: The Stone Edition, p. 127

YOUR BIRTHRIGHT. Since the [sacrificial] service was performed by the firstborn, Jacob said, "This wicked man does not deserve to sacrifice to the Holy One, blessed be He." (Gen. Rabbah 63:13).

Rashi on Gen. 25:31

FIRST SELL. Seeing that as of now all your interests are focused on your work so that you are so tired...there is no question that you would not have the time or energy to perform the duties involved in the obligations associated with being a firstborn.

Seforno on Gen. 25:31

The Torah explains that Isaac loves his older son Esau best not because Esau is a good person or a great leader, but because Isaac likes the taste of the animals that Esau hunts. And, the Torah says,

Esau does not deserve to be the next chieftain of the Hebrews because Esau cares more for a delicious meal...than he cares about his birthright. Esau is the kind of person who only cares about what is important now, this minute, and thinks nothing about what is important in the long run. He sells his birthright to Jacob because he is hungry *now*.

The Torah: Portion by Portion, pp. 40-41

[THUS DID ESAU] SPURN [THE BIRTHRIGHT]. Even after he had eaten and drunk he did not feel that Jacob had tricked him and taken advantage of him when he had felt hungry.

Kimchi on Gen. 25:34

THUS DID ESAU SPURN THE BIRTHRIGHT. This sums up the transaction. Esau was neither duped nor defrauded. He sold the birthright because he held it in contempt. It had no value to him when he was famished and it remained meaningless after he was gorged.

The Chumash: The Stone Edition on Gen 25:34, p. 128

THUS DID ESAU SPURN THE BIRTHRIGHT. Our sympathy with Esau is somewhat dissipated when the Narrator describes his inner feelings. Having finished the broth, Esau does not quarrel with Jacob but goes indifferently about his business, with no apparent regard for the sacred institution of the first-born.

Sarna on Gen. 25:34

פרשת ויצא

Parashat Vayeitzei

Genesis 28:10 – 32:3

Synopsis

Parashat Vayeitzei continues the story of Jacob, reminding us that he flees from his home and journeys toward the land of Haran. He stops at a certain place for the night and places a stone under his head for a pillow. He has a peculiar dream of a stairway leading to the sky, with angels climbing up and down. God stands beside him in the dream and promises him the land, as well as innumerable offspring. God reminds Jacob that he is protected wherever he goes and that God will always be with him. When Jacob awakes from his sleep he exclaims, “Surely the Lord is present in this place, and I did not know it!” Jacob names the place Bethel (or “House of God”) and vows to accept God, assuming he makes it safely through his journey.

Jacob continues his journey and comes across a well, where he meets Rachel, the daughter of Laban, Rebekah’s brother. He kisses her and tells her who he is and she runs to tell her father of Jacob’s arrival. Laban instantly takes Jacob in and Jacob quickly falls in love with Rachel. Jacob makes an agreement with Laban to work for him for seven years in exchange for Rachel’s hand in marriage. Jacob holds up his end of the bargain, and after seven years, asks Laban for Rachel’s hand. Laban agrees, but then tricks Jacob, giving him Leah, Rachel’s older sister, instead. Jacob confronts Laban, who agrees to give him Rachel as well, if he works for seven more years. Jacob agrees and is allowed to marry Rachel before he begins the next seven years of labor.

Leah gives birth to four sons, but Rachel remains barren. Rachel says to Jacob, “Give me children, or I shall die.” Jacob becomes angry and reminds Rachel that it is God, not he, who has denied her children. Rachel gives Jacob her maid, Bilhah, who then bears two sons. Leah then gives Jacob her maid, Zilpah, who also bears two sons. Rachel makes a deal with Leah to exchange

mandrakes (plants) for a night with Jacob and Leah bears two more sons and a daughter. At long last, Rachel bears a son, whom she names Joseph.

Jacob asks Laban for leave to return to his family and Laban requests that he stay, asking what he would like as wages. Jacob asks Laban only for the speckled and spotted animals from his flock. Jacob mates the sheep so that his own flocks increase in size and keeps them separate from Laban's. Laban's attitude toward Jacob changes and God tells Jacob to return to his homeland. Jacob calls on Rachel and Leah and tells them of a dream he had, confirming God's instruction to leave. Rachel and Leah agree and Jacob and his entire family, along with all of their wealth, prepare to return to Canaan. On their way out of town, Rachel steals her father's household idols. Jacob and his family flee and on the third day of their absence, Laban finds out that they are gone. He goes after them, gets a warning from God not to do anything – good or bad – to Jacob, and after seven days, catches up with them. He confronts Jacob and inquires about his idols. Jacob, not knowing that Rachel stole them, tells Laban that whoever is found with the idols shall not remain alive. Rachel sits on the idols so that Laban is unable to find them. Jacob becomes angry at Laban and reminds him of all the good he has done in the last twenty years. Jacob and Laban make a pact and share a feast to seal the deal. The next day, Laban returns home and Jacob and his family continue their journey, encountering angels of God along the way.

Central Text(s)

- Genesis, chapter 28, verses 10-22

Essential Questions

- Should dreams be taken at face value or interpreted for deeper meaning?
- What does tradition say about Jacob's dream?
- What can we learn from Jacob's dream?
- What is the meaning of the vow Jacob makes after waking up from the dream?

- What does Jacob's vow teach us about how Jacob viewed his dream?

Materials Needed

- Participant Handouts (one for each participant)
- Pens/pencils (one for every two participants)
- Blank Paper (a few pieces for every two participants)

Session Plan

Introduction:

Torah is full of stories – stories about God, the world, people and even animals; stories meant to teach us lessons about life, what is important and how to live righteously. These stories are told in different ways – sometimes through prose, sometimes through narrative, sometimes through poetry, and occasionally, through dreams and visions. One of the most glorious things about Torah is that it is written in such a way that the reader is able to interpret the meaning of the stories and make them his or her own. Certainly it is this aspect of Torah that paves the way for the centuries of commentary and interpretation that make up the corpus of Jewish literature and thought.

Some of the Torah's stories are easily interpreted and their meaning is clear even after the first reading. Other stories are more complicated and, as a result, offer many different interpretations. The most difficult type of biblical story to interpret is the dream. While the Torah is chock full of prose and narrative, dreams in the Bible are few and far between. In his book, *Bible Dreams: The Spiritual Quest: How the Dreams in the Bible Speak to Us Today*, Rabbi Seymour Rossel points out, ...the Bible chooses only a handful of dreams and visions to record and pass on to us. Without going into the mechanics of the Bible's development, it seems self-evident that those dreams and visions were not chosen at random. Indeed, they provide a map for our spiritual journey.¹²

¹² P. 8

The Torah portion *Vayeitzei* contains one such dream – perhaps the most well-known dream in the Bible – commonly referred to as “Jacob’s Ladder.” Though the dream itself is recounted in four verses (three of which contain God’s message to Jacob), it is a dream that has puzzled and inspired scholars and lay-people alike for centuries. The events surrounding the dream – where Jacob was, what he slept on, what he did and felt upon waking – are also the subject of much discussion. Jacob’s dream has been told and retold, interpreted and reinterpreted, many times over. In each telling and each interpretation, new insight is gained and new opinions are formed.

Such is the case with all dreams. How often have you had a dream and then, the next morning, quickly jotted it down or recounted it to a friend or family member, gaining new insight based on their reaction? And how many of us have tried desperately to find meaning in our dreams – to interpret them so that they make sense and relate to the circumstances of our lives? Consciously or not, most people believe that dreams do have a greater meaning and perhaps even some purpose in life. Rabbi Rossel writes,

Dreams and visions play an especially important part in preparing us for moments of transformation. And, after moments of transformation pass, dreams and visions help us first to process the changes we have undergone and then to create new meanings for our life histories.¹³

The dreams recounted in the Bible are no exception. Rabbi Rossel continues,

The dreams and visions included in the Bible share a common thread. To the extent that we can understand them, they seem to be guideposts to interpreting moments of transformation that occur not only in the lives of biblical characters but in our own lives as well.¹⁴

¹³ *Bible Dreams: The Spiritual Quest: How the Dreams in the Bible Speak to Us Today*, pp. 7-8

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 8

As such, it stands to reason that the dream recorded in *Vayeitzei*, Jacob's Ladder, as well as its aftermath, has a significant message to impart to us.

Opening Activity (15 minutes)

Welcome participants and, if they do not know each other, ask them to introduce themselves.

Explain to participants that this session will focus on the dream Jacob has during his journey to Haran, where he hopes to find a wife. The telling of the dream is quite straightforward, but its meaning is much harder to decipher. Also of interest is what Jacob does after awaking from the dream. As we study the dream itself, and the interpretations given by scholars, we are forced to ask: is the dream meant to be taken at face value or searched for deeper meaning? What can the dream and its aftermath teach us? Are Jacob's dream and his ensuing actions an expression of faith in God, or a lack thereof? Together, we will seek the answers to these questions.

Ask participants to divide themselves into *chevruta* groups and take a moment to think of a dream they've had that they believe has significance in their lives. It is not important whether they understand the dream or not. Ask them to share their dreams with their partners, allowing time for the others in the group to respond to the dream. As participants discuss their dreams, suggest that they answer the following questions:

- What about the dream leads you to believe that it has significance in your life?
- Is the dream meant to be taken literally or is it more symbolic? Why? If it is symbolic, what might it stand for?
- How did you feel when you woke up from the dream? How does that feeling impact your interpretation of the dream?
- How did your behavior or actions change after having the dream?

Once participants have had a chance to share their dreams and discuss the questions with their *chevruta*, invite them to rejoin the group. Tell participants that in *parashat Vayeitzei*, Jacob has a

dream that he (and the commentators) believe has significance in his life and perhaps even in the life of the Jewish people. In studying this dream, as well as how Jacob behaves after waking up, we learn valuable lessons about faith, God and the role dreams play in our lives.

Read the Text (15 minutes)

Give each participant a copy of the participant handout. Ask a member of the group to read Genesis, chapter 28, verses 10-22, aloud and then summarize it for the group. Discuss the following with participants:

- What is your initial reaction to the text? What strikes you about this text?
- What questions does this text raise for you?
- What is your first impression about Jacob's dream? What are your ideas about what it means?
- Do you think Jacob's dream is meant to be taken literally or searched for deeper meaning?
- In the context of God's promise to Jacob in his dream, what about Jacob's vow seems strange? How might you explain the inconsistency?
- While the dream itself is described in four verses, the events that take place before and after it are detailed in twice as many verses. Why do you think the emphasis of the story is on the events surrounding the dream rather than the dream itself?

These twelve verses raise many questions that scholars have been trying to answer for centuries. Why is it necessary for the text to point out that Jacob left Beer-sheba, when earlier in the chapter it already stated that he left? Why is the place where Jacob stopped called "a certain place" and not named outright? What is the significance of the fact that Jacob used a stone for a pillow? What is the meaning of the stairway and the angels in the dream? How can God be standing beside Jacob when Jacob is lying down? Why is Abraham called Jacob's father when Isaac was Jacob's father? Are Jacob's offspring promised only the small piece of land on which Jacob was lying or the entire land of Israel? What does Jacob mean when he says that the place is "the abode of God" and

“the gateway to heaven”? Why does Jacob set up a pillar and pour oil on it? If no one but Jacob is present, why did he speak his vow out loud? Does Jacob mean for his vow to be conditional? Though we could devote an entire study session to each of these questions, we will focus on two instances in the text – the dream and the vow.

I Dreamed a Dream (30 minutes)

Direct participants to the section in the participant handout entitled, “I Dreamed a Dream.”

Read the first quotation (from *Bible Dreams: The Spiritual Quest: How the Dreams in the Bible Speak to Us Today*) aloud. Discuss the quotation with the group using the following guide questions:

- What does the sage mean by his statement?
- Do you agree with his statement? Why or why not?
- Can you think of an example of a dream that, taken literally, has no influence, but looked at symbolically, may have great influence?

Tell participants: whether or not we agree with the statement of this sage, taken literally, Jacob’s dream seems a bit absurd. After all, who has ever heard of a stairway whose top reached to the sky? And who has ever seen an angel of God climbing a stairway? In general, scholars agree that Jacob’s dream is not meant to be taken literally, and there are countless interpretations of the dream recorded in countless manuscripts and books. We will study just a few in order to gain a deeper understanding of the dream, as well as to begin to formulate our own interpretation of Jacob’s dream.

Before we begin our study, however, it is important to note that moderns view dreams a bit differently than did our biblical ancestors. Rabbi Rossel sums up this difference nicely in his book, *Bible Dreams: The Spiritual Quest: How the Dreams in the Bible Speak to Us Today*. He points out that, as moderns, we look at dreams as “unreal events influencing our real world,”¹⁵ whereas “Our

¹⁵ P. 15

biblical ancestors saw no difference between the reality of everyday life and the reality of dreams and vision.”¹⁶ It is clear that our biblical ancestors viewed their dreams on quite a different level than do we. As such, in our study of Jacob’s dream, we will refrain from applying modern interpretive techniques, such as Freudian analysis or psychological theory, and will focus instead on the corpus of Jewish literature that offers rich interpretation of Jacob’s dream.

Ask participants to rejoin their *chevruta* group and give each group a blank piece of paper and a pen or pencil. With their *chevruta*, ask participants to read all but the last quotation in this section. As they read, ask them to take notes summarizing each commentator’s interpretation of the dream. Ask participants to jot down key words or phrases from each quotation, as well as initial reactions to the interpretation. Once groups have had a chance to read the quotations and complete the exercise, invite them to rejoin the group.

Taking each quotation and each group in turn, discuss each of the quotations, allowing an opportunity for each group to add in any key points they’d like. In particular, focus on the following from each quotation:

- Book of Legends: Sefer Ha-Aggadah (“The Holy One showed Jacob...”)
 - The dream offers Jacob a glance into the as-yet-unfolded history of the ancient superpowers of the world, among whom the Israelites were to be exiled.
 - Though not stated explicitly, the quotation implies that Jacob represents the kingdom of Israel, seemingly stable in this ascension to and fall from power.
- Ibn Ezra (“...the way to interpret...”)
 - The dream is a parable (a short story meant to teach a lesson). The parable teaches that God is all-knowing and that the events of the world are dependent on God.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 20

- The ladder represents the means by which the angels go between heaven and earth, first observing the world and then reporting what they have seen to God.
- Like servants to a king, the angels descend to do God's work on earth.
- The Chumash: The Stone Edition ("The dreams mentioned in Scripture...")
 - The dream is meant to be taken as a prophecy. The prophecy tells of the future of the Jewish people and man's role in the world.
 - *(Incidentally, Mount Moriah, where this quotation suggests the dream took place, is the site on which Abraham was asked to sacrifice Isaac and the site upon which, much later in history, the Beit haMikdash, or Holy Temple, would be built.)*
- The Torah: A Women's Commentary ("Scholars have noted...")
 - This interpretation suggests that the stairway in Jacob's dream is of something that actually existed – the ziggurat. *(Jacob would have been familiar with the structure through stories his grandfather, Abraham, and father, Isaac, would have told about their time in Canaan.)*
 - The stairway in the dream is, in a practical sense, the vehicle by which angels make their way from heaven to earth and back and, in a symbolic sense, the representation of communication between God and humanity.
- Sarna ("They play no role...")
 - As suggested in prior interpretations, the ladder is the means by which angels go between heaven and earth.
 - While the angels play no practical role in the dream, they symbolize Jacob's feelings and prayers, which he hopes will elicit a response from God.
- Hachut Hameshulash ("Another way of looking...")

- The stairway and angels represent man's desire for wisdom about God and the world (the ascension) and the provision of clues about God and the world (the descent).
- Alternatively, the ascension represents divine inspiration and the descent represents the application of those inspirations to everyday life.
- Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary ("We ascend toward God...")
 - The dream represents the relationship of human to God, which is a slow and gradual process of moving forward and falling back.

Ask a member of the group to read the final quotation (from *Bible Dreams: The Spiritual Quest: How the Dreams in the Bible Speak to Us Today*) in this section aloud. If, as this quotation suggests, the dreams in the Bible hold messages for us, the modern reader, we must now take a moment to think about what message it holds. Ask participants: what message can we glean from this dream? What does the dream teach us about our own relationship with God and the world? What notions about God and the world that you previously held have been changed through the study of this dream and its various interpretations? As we continue in our study of this text, ask participants to think about which of these interpretations make sense and are meaningful to them, as well as how they might interpret the dream differently.

The If/Then Vow (20 minutes)

Direct participants to the section in the participant handout entitled, "The If/Then Vow." Remind participants that as important as the dream itself is how we allow it to impact our lives. After Jacob awakes from his dream, he is shaken, and exclaims his feelings about the dream and the place. What's more, he takes certain actions – building a pillar and making a vow (a significant action, considering that the consequence for breaking a vow in Jewish tradition is death) – that come about as a direct result of the dream. While these actions make perfect sense in the context of the dream (and some scholars even suggest that the purpose of the dream is to explain these

actions¹⁷), what is peculiar is the wording of Jacob's vow. Together with the whole group, read and summarize each quotation in turn and discuss using the following guide questions:

- Kimchi ("The vow Jacob made...")
 - What about the vow causes Kimchi to conclude that it is a conditional vow? (*The use of the word "if" in the text itself.*)
 - Why does Kimchi believe that Jacob made a conditional vow? (*To protect himself in the event that he sinned, nullifying the vow. Or, he was afraid he would be unable to uphold his end of the vow if he sinned.*)
- Judaica Press Books of the Bible ("Ohr Hachayim takes this to mean...")
 - This commentator suggests that the word "if" in Jacob's vow really means "when." Why might this subtle difference be important? (*The use of the word "if" indicates that Jacob is not sure that God will uphold God's end of the bargain. This is problematic because it calls Jacob's faith into question.*)
 - Is it possible that Jacob actually did doubt that God would uphold God's end of the bargain? Why or why not?
 - If Jacob did doubt that God would fulfill God's end of the bargain, how does that impact our view of Jacob as a patriarch of our people?
- Seforno ("To remove from me...")
 - What does Seforno believe Jacob means when he says, "If God remains with me"? (*That if God creates an environment in which Jacob can focus completely on his faith and related duties he will be able to fulfill his vow.*)

¹⁷ *A Letter That Has Not Been Read: Dreams in the Hebrew Bible*, p. 184

- To what “matters” do you think Seforno is referring? What do you think God expects from people? How might God provide an environment for us that allows us to focus on these “matters”?
- New Studies in Bereshit Genesis (“All that Jacob’s vow...”)
- This commentator echoes Seforno’s sentiments. In addition, it suggests that Jacob’s vow teaches “future formulators of vows” how to articulate vows, suggesting that they are meant to be petitions to God. Do you agree with the idea that vows are meant to be petitions? Why or why not?
- Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary (“Several commentators are troubled...”)
- This quotation suggests that Jacob used the word “if” because he doubted whether what he had just dreamed was real or not. Should the validity of the dream matter to Jacob? Why or why not? Can Jacob base his trust of what he saw on the events that transpired between his grandfather, Abraham, and God? Why or why not?

Though the commentators offer many solutions for what they see as the problem of the conditional vow, none believe that the vow was actually meant to be conditional. But what if it was?

Discuss the following with participants:

- How would the story change if the vow was actually meant to be conditional? How might this literal interpretation change our opinion of Jacob?
- How are the interpretations of the vow in line with the commentator’s interpretations of the dream? How do they differ?
- How does the vow demonstrate the impact of the dream in Jacob’s life? In our lives?
- How does the vow impact your own interpretation of the dream?

Jacob’s vow is a representation of the way in which a dream can impact our thoughts and feelings and change our behavior. Dreams, though they happen in an instant, have the power to

change our lives forever, particularly through the actions we take as a result. As such, the analysis and interpretation of dreams is certainly a worthwhile activity in which to engage.

Concluding Activity (10 minutes)

In modern times, people have made fortunes interpreting dreams. Even in the Bible, Joseph rises to a position of power in Egypt because he is able to interpret Pharaoh's dreams accurately. Simply by turning on our computers and connecting to the Internet, we have access to hundreds of websites that can interpret our dreams for us, some of them for free! These interpretations, however, are based on modern sensibilities and current social milieu. They would hardly be adequate to interpret the dream of a biblical character.

Ask participants to rejoin their *chevruta* groups and give each group some paper and a pen or pencil. Explain to participants that modern dreams are often interpreted by the symbols present within the dreams. A dream dictionary might be organized according to symbols such as "darkness" and the entry for darkness might explain that in dreams, darkness represents failure. The task of each *chevruta* is to create their own dream dictionary that explains and interprets the symbols and events in Jacob's dream. Using the interpretations for the dream and vow provided in the participant handout, as well as the notes you took earlier and your own interpretations of Jacob's dream, write a dream dictionary for the symbols in Jacob's dream or, if you prefer, write your own interpretation of Jacob's dream. If time allows, ask participants to share their work with the group.

Thank participants for coming and remind them that though we may never know exactly what Jacob's dream means, we do know that it has a lot to teach us about our relationship with God and our world, as well as about faith. In his book, *Bible Dreams: The Spiritual Quest: How the Dreams in the Bible Speak to Us Today*, Rabbi Seymour Rossel eloquently points out that, "The dreams in the Bible hint at what is possible for each of us to achieve – the mutual quest that can take us even

beyond ourselves.”¹⁸ In the wise words of Langston Hughes, “Hold fast to your dreams, for without them life is a broken winged bird that cannot fly.” By holding on to our dreams; by sharing them, analyzing them and interpreting them; by allowing them to significantly impact our lives, we can truly be the best versions of ourselves, flying through life and engaging in the quest for faith and meaning.

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 325

פרשת ויצא

Parashat Vayeitzei

Participant Handout

Genesis, Chapter 28, Verses 10-22

¹⁰ Jacob left Beer-sheba, and set out for Haran. ¹¹ He came upon a certain place and stopped there for the night, for the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of that place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. ¹² He had a dream; a stairway was set on the ground and its top reached to the sky, and angels of God were going up and down on it. ¹³ And the LORD was standing beside him and He said, "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac: the ground on which you are lying I will assign to you and to your offspring. ¹⁴ Your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you and your descendants. ¹⁵ Remember, I am with you: 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." ¹⁶ Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is present in this place, and I did not know it!" ¹⁷ Shaken, he said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the abode of God, and that is the gateway to heaven." ¹⁸ Early in the morning, Jacob took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. ¹⁹ He named that site Bethel; but previously the name of the city had been Luz. ²⁰ Jacob then made a vow, saying, "If God remains with me, if He protects me on this journey that I am making, and gives me bread to eat and clothing to wear, ²¹ and if I return safe to my father's house – the LORD shall be my God. ²² And this stone, which I have set up as a pillar, shall be God's abode; and of all that You give me, I will set aside a tithe for You."

I Dreamed a Dream

One sage remarks, "If you take dreams literally, they have no influence whatsoever."

Bible Dreams: The Spiritual Quest, p. 102-103

HE HAD A DREAM...AND ANGELS OF GOD WERE GOING UP AND DOWN ON IT (Gen. 28:12)...The Holy One showed Jacob the angelic princes of the four kingdoms [Babylon, Media, Greece, and Rome (the four kingdoms among whom the Jewish people were to be exiled)] ascending and descending...

Book of Legends: Sefer Ha-Aggadah, section 67, p. 45

...The way to interpret Jacob's dream is to view it as a parable. It teaches that nothing is hidden from God and that what happens below is contingent on the decree from above. There is thus, as it were, a ladder linking heaven and earth by which angels ascend to inform God what they have seen on earth after going over it. Scripture also states that other angels come down to fulfill God's commands. The imagery presented is that of a king and his servants.

Ibn Ezra on Gen. 28:12

The dreams mentioned in Scripture are vehicles of prophecy; otherwise the Torah – which uses words very sparingly – would not cite them. Jacob's dream at Mount Moriah symbolized the future of the Jewish people and man's ability to connect himself to God's master plan.

The Chumash: The Stone Edition on Gen. 28:12

Scholars have noted that the ladder in Jacob's dream is most likely a ziggurat, a tower known from the temples of Mesopotamia. This "ladder" serves as a bridge between heaven and earth upon which angels ascend and descend – thus indicating the dialogic nature of communication between the two realms.

The Torah: A Women's Commentary on Gen. 28:12-15

ANGELS OF GOD. They play no role in the dream. Their presence may reflect the notion of angelic beings who patrol the earth and report back to God. It is also possible that the angelic activity may symbolize Jacob's personal hopes and fears, his prayers for protection, which rise to heaven and receive a response.

Sarna on Gen. 28:12

HE HAD A DREAM, A STAIRWAY...Another way of looking at the ascending and descending "angels" is that they represent the quest of man for wisdom regarding God and His universe, i.e. ascending, and the angels of God meeting man halfway in providing him with such knowledge, i.e. "descending." Alternatively, after man has ascended to receive divinely inspired insights he returns to earth "descends," to incorporate the newly gained insights in his world view.

Akeyday Yitzchak, as quoted in *Hachut Hameshulash*, vol. 2, p. 558

A STAIRWAY. We ascend toward God one step at a time, making one small change in our lives and stabilizing it before we take another step. Sometimes we slip and miss a step, falling back, but we recover and keep climbing. Most people do not leap toward God in one great burst of enthusiasm.

Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary on Gen. 28:12

The visions and dreams included in the Bible were extraordinary in the sense that they held messages not only for the dreamers themselves but also for the entire spiritual community.

The If/Then Vow

[JACOB] THEN MADE [A VOW]. The vow Jacob made at this point was a conditional one. The conditional nature did not mean that Jacob doubted the promise God had made to him and God's ability to fulfill it; rather he was afraid that just as all of God's promises presume that the recipient remains worthy of them, so Jacob was also afraid that some errors he might commit in the future, sinful conduct, would invalidate God's promises. This is the only reason that he prefaced the vow with the words: IF GOD REMAINS WITH ME, etc. He was afraid that if he would commit a sin or sins he might never see his father's house again so that he would be unable to fulfill the vow he was about to make.

Kimchi on Gen. 28:20

IF GOD REMAINS WITH ME. *Ohr Hachayim* takes this to mean: "When God will be with me" etc., because Jacob surely did not doubt that God would fulfill His promise.

Ohr Yakar, as quoted in *Judaica Press Books of the Bible: The Book of Genesis*, vol. 2, p. 356

IF GOD REMAINS WITH ME. To remove from me all the pressures which I am under, pressures which prevent man from giving his attention to matters which should receive his attention, i.e. to God and what He expects from man...

Seforno on Gen. 28:20

All that Jacob's vow implied was: "Give me the possibility of serving You." It provides the archetype for future formulators of vows which are not meant to be commercial deals with the Almighty but petitions for His help in granting man opportunity to give of himself, his life and soul to God.

New Studies in Bereshit Genesis, p. 307

Several commentators are troubled by Jacob's saying, "if [God] protects me" when God has just promised to do so in his dream...[This]...comment may reflect Jacob's doubts about the validity of his dream. Was it real or just wishful thinking? Can Jacob, like his grandfather Abraham, trust God to fulfill the divine promise?

Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary on Gen. 28:20-21

פרשת וישלח

Parashat Vayishlach

Genesis 32:4 – 36:43

Synopsis

Parashat Vayishlach begins as Jacob sends his brother Esau a message, hoping to reconcile with him. Jacob is informed that Esau is coming to meet him and that he has four hundred men with him. Afraid that Esau means to start a war, Jacob divides his camp in two, hoping that if one is attacked, the other will escape. Jacob prays to God for safety and, the next morning, sends Esau gifts of many different types of animals. He then takes his family across the river Jabbok, sends his possessions after them, and is eventually left alone by the stream. A being wrestles with Jacob all night, wrenching Jacob's hip socket. Jacob seems to have put up a good fight, because the man asks Jacob to let him go. Jacob refuses, saying that first the man must bless him. The man changes Jacob's name to Israel, a name chosen because Jacob wrestles with both human and divine beings and wins. Jacob names the place¹⁹ and limps away.

Jacob sees Esau and his men coming and organizes his family to greet him, going ahead of them and bowing low to the ground seven times as he approaches his brother. Esau runs to meet him, embracing and kissing him. The two weep and Jacob introduces Esau to his family. After discussing the possibility of journeying on together, the brothers go their separate ways, and Jacob arrives safely in the city of Shechem, where he buys a piece of land and sets up an altar.

Leah and Jacob's daughter, Dina, goes out to visit the daughters of the land. Shechem, the chief of the country, takes her, and lays with her by force. He is in love with her and asks his father, Hamor, to arrange a marriage between the two. Jacob and his sons find out what happened and are outraged. Hamor comes to them and asks them to allow Dina to marry his son, no matter the bride price. Dina's brothers respond that it would be improper to let Dina marry an uncircumcised man,

¹⁹ In the biblical text (32:31-32), the place is called both "Peniel" and "Penuel," literally meaning "the face of God." Both names refer to the same place, the place in which Jacob wrestles with the being.

but agree that if all the men of the town are circumcised, Dina can marry Shechem. The men of the town agree and circumcise themselves. On the third day after their circumcision, Simeon and Levi, two of Dina's brothers, kill all of the men of the town, including Hamor and Shechem, and take Dina, whom it appears is being held captive, out of the town. The other brothers plunder the town, an act of revenge for their sister. Jacob is angry with Simeon and Levi, fearing that his camp may be attacked in retaliation by the surrounding peoples. Simeon and Levi respond by asking, "Should our sister be treated like a whore?"

God tells Jacob to go to Bethel (the place of his stairway dream), settle there and build an altar to God. Jacob instructs the members of his camp to rid themselves of alien gods, purify themselves and change their clothes. They do so and journey on to Bethel. Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, dies and is buried under an oak tree. God appears to Jacob again while he is in Bethel, blesses him and reiterates the fact that his name has been changed from Jacob to Israel. Rachel dies giving birth to a child, who is called Benjamin. She is buried on the road to Ephrath, now Bethlehem. Jacob sets up a pillar over her grave and continues on his journey. Reuben, one of Jacob's sons, lays with Bilhah, one of Jacob's concubines, and Jacob finds out.

Jacob's twelve sons are listed according to their mothers. Jacob returns to his father Isaac, who dies at one hundred eighty years old, and is buried by Jacob and Esau. The line of Esau is detailed, including the fact that he takes his wives from the Canaanite women and has several children. Because both he and his brother have so many possessions, the land cannot support them both, and Esau settles in Seir. Esau's sons and daughters are outlined, as are the clans of Esau and the kings of Edom.

Central Text(s)

- Genesis, chapter 32, verses 25-32

Essential Questions

- With whom did Jacob wrestle and what was the purpose of the wrestling match?
- How did Jacob change as a result of the wrestling match?
- Why is it that the angel cannot or does not tell Jacob its name?
- With what do we wrestle and how are we changed as a result of these wrestling matches?
- What is the importance of names in this episode?
- What is the importance of names in our lives?

Materials Needed

- Participant Handouts (one for each participant)
- Pens/pencils (one for every two participants)
- Blank Paper (a few pieces for every two participants)
- Optional: Copies of the *Tanach* (Torah, Prophets and Writings)

Session Plan

Introduction:

Parashat Vayishlach begins as Jacob is about to face one of the most pivotal moments in his life – his reunion with Esau. When last Jacob saw his brother Esau they were bitter enemies, and Esau was planning to kill Jacob, a threat that caused Jacob to flee from his home. Though we cannot know for sure, it stands to reason that Jacob is terrified of this reunion. He even divides his camp in two, hoping that if Esau attacks one, the other will survive. Jacob also sends Esau lavish gifts, in the hope that it will soften Esau up a bit before the two meet.

The evening before the reunion, Jacob finds himself alone on the bank of the river. We can only imagine what Jacob must have been thinking at that moment. What will I say to Esau? Will he forgive me? Am I going to die tomorrow? Will we ever really be brothers again? Jacob might also have been thinking about the past. His boyhood interactions with Esau were marked with lies, trickery and deceit. Jacob convinced Esau to give Jacob his birthright for some stew and then Jacob

stole Esau's blessing. Perhaps Jacob is now sitting alone on the riverbank feeling guilty about what he has done to his brother, trying to figure out how to apologize and whether Esau will ever forgive him.

Regardless of what he is thinking, it is clear that Jacob has some issues to deal with. Before he can reconcile with his brother, he has to reconcile with himself, perhaps even struggle with himself. In order to make it safely and successfully through this reunion with his brother, in order to embark on the journey home, he must first recognize how he himself has grown and changed during his time away. After all, over the last several years, Jacob has become a new man – married, with great wealth and children and remarkable scruples. He has been through much and done quite well for himself. Even in the face of all those successes, he must still struggle with his past and somehow come to terms with it. And struggle he does. This session will focus on Jacob's struggle, how it changes him and what we can learn from Jacob's experience.

Opening Activity (10 minutes)

Welcome participants and, if they do not know each other, ask them to introduce themselves.

Explain to participants that this session will focus on an episode in Jacob's life that is hard to explain. In a few minutes, we will read the text of the episode and talk about it in more detail, but for now, it will be sufficient to know the following: Jacob is at a transitional moment in his life – about to be reunited with his brother and return to the land of his birth and youth. He is a different man, but still must face his past. As is often the case in this type of situation, in order to face his past, Jacob must first face himself.

Ask participants to divide themselves into *chevruta* groups and take a moment to think about a significant episode or experience in their lives that changed them forever – for the better or for the worse. If they feel comfortable, ask them to share the details of this experience with their partners. As participants tell their stories, suggest that they answer the following questions:

- What events led up to this experience? What events followed this experience?
- Is there any background information or life history that impacted your experience?
- How did you feel before the experience? After the experience?
- Did you have to engage in any type of struggle (with yourself or another) to get through this experience?
- How are you changed as a result of this experience?

Once participants have had a chance to tell their stories and discuss the above questions with their *chevruta*, invite them to rejoin the group. Tell participants that in *parashat Vayishlach*, we learn of an episode in Jacob's life that forever changed him. This episode affects Jacob in every way and in the end he limps away with a new name and a strengthened identity. By studying this episode and how it affects Jacob, we have the potential to come to a deeper understanding of how struggle affects us, how we are changed as a result and how we live up to our names.

Read the Text (10 minutes)

Give each participant a copy of the participant handout. Ask a member of the group to read Genesis, chapter 32, verses 25-32, aloud and then summarize it for the group. Discuss the following with participants:

- What is your initial reaction to the text? What strikes you about this text?
- What questions does this text raise for you?
- Whom do you think is wrestling with Jacob? What might be the purpose of the wrestling match?
- What is the significance of Jacob's name change in this story?
- Why does Jacob ask the name of the other? And why might the other refuse this request?
- Is this story meant to be taken literally or symbolically? Explain your answer.

This episode in Jacob's life is unclear and confusing. Scholars have been struggling with its interpretation for centuries and have come up with many differing views about what it means and

how to take it. Even so, this story clearly shows that Jacob engages in a struggle and is changed afterward. He is given a new name and a blessing and perhaps even another chance at life (see verse 31). What's more, whether the struggle actually took place or was a vision or dream, it affected Jacob to the point that he was limping. Through a closer look at some of the interpretations of this episode, as well as a brief study of the issue of names in this passage, we will do our part in shedding light and clarity on this confusing and powerful narrative.

Wrestling Match (30 minutes)

Direct participants to the section in the participant handout entitled, "Wrestling Match." Tell participants that two of the questions scholars have been focusing on for ages are: who was the "man" with whom Jacob was wrestling and what was the purpose of this wrestling match? These quotations represent only a selection of the suggested answers to these questions.

Ask participants to rejoin their *chevruta* groups and give each group a blank piece of paper and a pen or pencil. With their *chevruta*, ask participants to read all the quotations in this section. As they read, ask them to jot down the answer each quotation gives to the two questions at hand – who or what was the "man" with whom Jacob was wrestling and what was the purpose of the wrestling match? Once groups have had a chance to read the quotations and complete the exercise, invite them to rejoin the group. Taking each quotation and each group in turn, discuss each of the quotations and answer the questions. Use the following as a guide:

- Rashbam ("After he had transferred...")
 - The "man" was an angel.
 - The purpose of the wrestling match was to prevent Jacob from fleeing the reunion with his brother.
- Kimchi ("The same type of 'man'...")

- The “man” was an angel. In particular, this was the angel Gabriel. *(To note: While Kimchi believes that the angel in question was “Gabriel,” the Book of Legends: Sefer Ha-Aggadah (Section 83) records a story in which the angel is “Michael.”)*
- The purpose of the wrestling match was to strengthen Jacob’s courage before his meeting with Esau. It was the ultimate ego boost.
- *New Studies in Bereshit Genesis (“If it is true to say...”)*
 - The “man” was “the prince of Esau” or Esau’s guardian angel. *(As indicated in the quotation, this opinion is first given in Genesis Rabbah, 77:3.)*
 - The purpose of the wrestling was so that the spirits of Esau and Jacob could fight it out before the physical Esau and Jacob reconciled, and so that Esau’s spirit could acknowledge Jacob’s paternal blessing.
- *Etz Chayim: Torah and Commentary (“...this may be an account...”)*
 - The “man” was Jacob’s conscience or the “divine impulse” within him.
 - The purpose of the wrestling match was for Jacob to overcome his conscience, growing into a man who no longer manipulates people.
- *A Torah Commentary for Our Times (“The modern writer Elie Wiesel...”)*
 - The “man” was Jacob himself or, more specifically, the part of Jacob that had doubts, fears and regrets.
 - The purpose of the wrestling match was for Jacob to figure out who he truly was and who he was destined to become. The purpose was for Jacob, in a sense, to overcome himself so that he could go forward with head held high.

Point out to participants that four of the five quotations suggest that the “man” was either an angel or in some way divine. The fifth quotation suggests that Jacob was wrestling with an aspect of himself. Ask participants: who or what do you think the “man” was? Why?

The quotations also offer different explanations for the purpose of the wrestling match. Again, ask participants, which quotation makes the most sense to you? Why?

Finally, ask participants to think of times in their own lives when they have been forced to “wrestle” with themselves, another person or an idea. How did they feel about the wrestling match? What was the purpose of the wrestling match? What was the outcome? How were they changed as a result of the wrestling match?

With their *chevruta*, ask participants to write their own interpretation of Jacob’s encounter using the quotations, their notes, and the *Tanach* (if available) to help. Again, ask participants to focus on who or what they think the “man” is and what is the purpose of the wrestling match. *(If available, the Tanach can be used to gain further background information about Jacob and the circumstances surrounding the episode.)* Once participants have had a chance to complete the exercise, ask them to share their interpretations with the group.

What’s In a Name? (30 minutes)

Direct participants to the section in the participant handout entitled, “What’s In a Name?” Explain to participants that names and naming are a major theme in this episode. The being with which Jacob wrestles changes his name, Jacob inquires after the name of the being and then Jacob names the place in which the episode occurred. For the purposes of this study, we will look closely at only the first two instances of names and naming.

Regardless of our opinion as to the nature of the being and the purpose of the wrestling match, it is clear that the episode marks a major transition in Jacob’s life. This transition is, in turn, marked by the changing of Jacob’s name to Israel. *(To note: though Jacob’s name is changed to Israel, he is not exclusively known as Israel after this episode. Later in the text of Genesis and the Tanach as a whole, Jacob is referred to as Jacob and Israel interchangeably.)* Clearly, then, the text implies that a person’s (or being’s) name is important and has some greater significance. Through a study of the

commentators' treatment of names in this episode, we will come to a greater understanding of the significance of a name.

Although in the text itself, Jacob's name is changed before Jacob asks the name of the being with whom he is wrestling, for the purposes of this study, we will look at the two incidents in the reverse order. Together with the whole group, read and summarize the first three quotations in this section in turn and discuss using the following guide questions (*it is important to note that all three commentators work under the assumption that the being with whom Jacob wrestles is an angel*):

- Rashi ("We have no permanent...")
 - Rashi's quotation is an answer to the question: why is it that the being will not tell Jacob his name?
 - What does Rashi say is the reason the angel will not give Jacob his name? (*Because the name of an angel changes based on his assignment. Therefore, the information is not relevant to Jacob.*)
 - In what way does the idea that our "name" changes according to our mission apply in real life? (*Though our real names may not ever change, we all operate under many names. We have a title at work that describes our job, we are called mother or father by our children, sister or brother by our siblings, etc. Many of us give our significant others and friends pet names that reflect our feelings for them.*) How do these "names" affect how we see ourselves?
- Seforno ("Which would describe...")
 - Seforno, like Rashi, believes that the angel's name is related to his function. Seforno suggests that in learning the name of the angel, Jacob will also learn why the angel attacked him in the first place.

- Why does Seforno think that Jacob is interested in learning the name of the angel?
(Because he could then determine what he did to deserve the attack and repent or make restitution for whatever sin he may have committed.)
- Do we, in modern society, “name” people based on their sins? If so, how? *(Names like “terrorist” and “criminal” describe people and indicate to the greater population that we should be wary of them.)*
- Ramban (“The angel said...”)
- Ramban suggests that the angel does not tell Jacob his name because he is representing God and, therefore, his name is inconsequential and it will do Jacob no good to know his name.
- If the angel is on a mission from God and representing God, why do you think the angel refuses to offer his name? *(Perhaps because the angel wants Jacob to associate the incident with God, not with the angel. This gives the incident a much greater significance.)*

The final two quotations in the section deal with Jacob’s name change. Together with the whole group, read and summarize the final two quotations in this section in turn and discuss using the following guide questions:

- Seforno (“A reference to the end...”)
- Seforno suggests that Jacob’s name change is a symbolic reference of a time in which Israel will have survived the destruction of all the other nations. The name “Jacob,” Seforno says, indicates that Jacob (and by extension, the people Israel) will triumph.
- Why is it important for Jacob to know that the people Israel will, in the end, triumph?
(As he is about to enter his reunion with Esau, in which he fears death, he may be concerned that if Esau does kill him, the people of Israel will not live on. This would be a

direct contradiction to God’s promise to Jacob that his seed will be like the sand and that they will become a great nation.)

- Do you agree with Seforno’s interpretation of the name change? Why or why not?
- *Etz Chayim: Torah and Commentary* (“The name [Israel]...”)
- This quotation argues that Jacob’s name change is a message to future readers of the text and members of the Jewish people. What message does this text suggest the name change gives? *(That to be a member of the Jewish people is, like Jacob, to struggle with God and live according to God’s rules.)*
- Do you agree with this interpretation of the name change? Why or why not?
- How do you think Jacob was aware of the fact that his name change might have had a message to impart to his descendants?

These two interpretations of Jacob’s name change are very specific in their opinion that the name change has less to do with Jacob and more to do with the future of the Jewish people. Ask participants: why do you think Jacob’s name was changed? How do you think Jacob’s name change might have affected his attitude going into his meeting with Esau? Having read and discussed all of the quotations in this section, why do you think the Torah places such great importance on names and naming in this episode?

Concluding Activity (10 minutes)

Names, in our lives as well as in the lives of the biblical characters, are important not only as tools of identification, but also as descriptions of traits and characteristics. Biblical characters are often named for circumstances surrounding their birth. For example, Isaac was named so because his mother and father laughed when they found out they were to have a child (the Hebrew *Yitzchak* is related to the word “laugh” in Hebrew). Additionally, we are told that Esau is named so because of his appearance and Jacob because he came out holding the heel of Esau (both Hebrew names are

related to the reasons for the name). In modern times, we are also named for a particular reason. Often, we are named to honor a deceased loved one or a favorite place or character of our parent's.

With their *chevruta* group, ask participants to share a little about their name, using the following suggested questions as a guide:

- Why did your parents choose your name? Were you named after someone or something?
- If you were named after someone, how do you emulate the qualities of that person?
- If you were named after something or for some other reason, do you have any characteristics that relate to your name?
- If you are Jewish, do you have a separate Hebrew name? Why did you or your parents choose that name? How does it speak to who you are?
- What is the importance of a name?

Thank participants for coming and remind them that, like Jacob, we will all encounter situations in our lives that will impact and possibly change us forever. It is not uncommon that these encounters or experiences surround major transitions and events in our lives. We may view ourselves in one way before the episode and in a completely different light after. Though we may not end up with our names changed as a result of the encounter, some part of our essence will be forever impacted. Let us all strive to allow these encounters to influence us positively and change us for the better, and let us all live up to our names, either given or personally chosen.

פרשת וישלח

Parashat Vayishlach

Participant Handout

Genesis, Chapter 32, Verses 25-32

²⁵ Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn. ²⁶ When he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he wrenched Jacob's hip at its socket, so that the socket of his hip was strained as he wrestled with him. ²⁷ Then he said, "Let me go, for dawn is breaking." But he answered, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." ²⁸ Said the other, "What is your name?" He replied, "Jacob." ²⁹ Said he, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed." ³⁰ Jacob asked, "Pray tell me your name." But he said, "You must not ask my name!" And he [blessed] him there. ³¹ So Jacob named the place Peniel, meaning, "I have seen a divine being face to face, yet my life has been preserved." ³² The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping on his hip.

Wrestling Match

JACOB WAS LEFT ALONE. After he had transferred all his belongings to the other side of the river, so that the only one still to be brought across was he himself. The reason that he wanted to cross only after everyone else had already crossed was that he intended to flee in a different direction so as to avoid a face to face encounter with Esau. [A MAN] WRESTLED. An angel engaged him in a physical fight, his purpose being to prevent Jacob from fleeing. Only in this way could God's promise to Jacob that Esau would not harm him be fulfilled.

Rashbam 32:25

A MAN. The same type of "man" as in Joshua 5:13, i.e. an angel. This was the angel Gabriel, described as "man" par excellence in Daniel 9:21. The reason why these angels are called "man" is because they appear to the people with whom they converse in human guise.

The types of angels who speak with man are referred to as "man," as they appear either in a vision or while the person to whom they appear is fully awake. God had sent this angel to Jacob to strengthen his courage, not to fear Esau. If Jacob could prevail over an angel, surely he had no reason to be afraid of an encounter with someone like Esau! The fact that the struggle lasted until daybreak was an allusion to Jacob that after a period of night, i.e. problems, adversity, there would come a period of light, peace and prosperity coupled with security...

Kimchi on Gen. 32:25

If it is true to say that the patriarch Jacob fought with the “prince [or angel] of Esau” [as is indicated in Genesis *Rabbah* 77:3], we may now understand why this particular spot and hour was chosen. Before Jacob actually encountered Esau in the flesh, his spirit struggled with that of Esau’s, with his national genius. Only after the prince of Esau had acknowledged his title to the paternal blessing (AND HE BLESSED HIM THERE) was Jacob, injured and limping, able to go forth to meet his brother and become reconciled with him.

New Studies in Bereshit Genesis, p. 368-369

AND A MAN WRESTLED WITH HIM...this may be an account of Jacob’s wrestling with his conscience, torn between his human tendency to avoid an unpleasant encounter and the divine impulse in him that urges him to do the difficult but right thing...By not defeating his conscience, Jacob wins. He outgrows his Jacob identity as the trickster and becomes Israel, the one who contends with God and people instead of avoiding or manipulating them...

Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary on Gen. 32:25

The modern writer Elie Wiesel...writes that “at Peniel...two Jacobs came together.”

There was the Jacob who had doubts about himself, fears about his future, and regrets about how he had stolen the blessing from his brother...And there was the other Jacob who was the “heroic dreamer,” the brave, experienced, and future-looking Jacob...

That night, the two sides of Jacob fought with each other. He wrestled with the most serious questions of his life. Who was he? What was really important to him? What were his responsibilities to himself and to those he loved? As dawn broke, he knew that he would never be the same. He was a changed person. He would limp away from his night battle with himself, but he would have a new name. He would no longer be Jacob, “the one who holds on to his brother’s heel,” or “the one who steals his brother’s blessing.” Now he would be Israel, “the one who had wrestled with himself and was now ready to wrestle with the world.”

Wiesel writes that “it was a turning point for Jacob. He had a choice: to die before dying or to take hold of himself and fight. And win. And win he did...Such, then, is the prime meaning of this episode: Israel’s history teaches us that man’s true victory is the one he achieves over himself” (*Messengers of God*, pp. 122-129).

A Torah Commentary for Our Times, p. 86

YOU MUST NOT ASK MY NAME. (Gen. Rabbah 78:4) We have no permanent name. Our names change, (all) according to the service we are commanded [to do] in the mission upon which we are sent.

Rashi on Gen. 32:30

“PRAY TELL ME YOUR NAME.” Which would describe your essence, your function, and how you would go about performing same. This would enable me to understand why you attacked me in the first place. I would then be able to do penitence for my sin, something I cannot do as long as I do not know what precisely my sin consists of.

Seforno on Gen. 32:30

“YOU MUST NOT ASK MY NAME!” The angel said: “There is no advantage to you in knowing my name for no one possesses the power and the capability other than God alone. If you will call upon me I will not answer you, nor will I save you from your trouble. However, I will now bless you, “for so I have been commanded” (Lev. 8:35).

Ramban on Gen. 32:30

NO LONGER BE JACOB. It shall no longer be said that the blessings came to you through trickery and deceit, but with nobility and openness, and ultimately, the Holy One, blessed be He, will reveal Himself to you in Beth-el and change your name, and there He will bless you, and I will be there.” He then acknowledged them (the blessings) as being his (Jacob’s).

Rashi on Gen. 32:29

THEN THE MAN SAID, “YOU SHALL NO LONGER BE CALLED JACOB...” A reference to the end of days when Israel will have survived the destruction of the gentile nations. When that time comes no one ever will again use the name Jacob for the Jewish people...The very word *Jacob* already contained within this message that the bearer of this name will triumph at the end. Once he has triumphed there is no more point in having a name which alludes to something which will be realized only in the future. The future will have then arrived!

Seforno on Gen. 32:29

The name Israel may be interpreted to mean “one who struggles with God.” Through the ages, Jews have struggled to understand what God means in their lives and have contended with God, insisting that God live up to the divinely proclaimed standards of justice and kindness.

Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary, pp. 202-203

פרשת וישב

Parashat Vayeishev

Genesis 37:1 – 40:23

Synopsis

At the beginning of *Parashat Vayeishev*, Jacob settles in Canaan, where his father once lived and where his sons now tend his flocks. Jacob loves his son Joseph more than any of the others and makes him an ornamented tunic (commonly referred to as “the coat of many colors”). Joseph’s brothers become jealous of Joseph and do not speak kindly to him. To make matters worse, Joseph has two dreams that he shares with his brothers. In the first, his brothers are sheaves in the field and they are bowing down to his sheaf. In the second, the sun, the moon and eleven stars are bowing down to him. Joseph’s father and brothers are upset with him, chagrined by the idea that there will be a time when they will all bow to Joseph. One day, while Joseph’s brothers are out pasturing the flock, Jacob sends Joseph out to see how they are and bring back word. Joseph goes to Shechem, where he believes them to be, and a man tells him they have gone to Dothan, so he follows. The brothers see him coming and plot to kill him. Reuben, however, disagrees. He suggests that they throw him in a pit. The brothers take Joseph’s coat and throw him into an empty pit. As the brothers sit down for a meal, a caravan of Ishmaelites approach and the brothers sell Joseph to the caravan for twenty pieces of silver. The caravan, along with Joseph, travels to Egypt. Reuben returns to the pit, sees that Joseph is gone and tears his clothes. The brothers take Joseph’s tunic, slaughter a goat and dip the tunic in the blood. They have the tunic taken to their father and ask him to identify it. Believing Joseph has been devoured by a beast, Jacob tears his clothes, puts on sackcloth and mourns for his son. No one is able to comfort him. Meanwhile, Joseph is sold to a man named Potiphar, a courtier of Pharaoh and his chief steward.

Joseph’s story is here interrupted, and we learn that Judah marries a woman whose mother is named Shua, and that this woman bears him three sons. For his first born, Er, Judah finds a wife

named Tamar, but Er is displeasing to God and God takes his life. Judah's second son, Onan, takes Tamar and lays with her, but purposely refrains from impregnating her and instead spills his seed, which displeases God. Onan's life is taken as well. Judah sends Tamar back to her father's house to stay until his third son grows up.

A long time afterward, Judah's wife dies, and when his period of mourning is over, he travels to Timnah. Tamar learns that he is on his way to Timnah, disguises herself and sits at a crossroads she knows he will pass on his journey, because though the third son is grown up, he has not been given to her as a husband. When Judah sees her, he mistakes her for a harlot and propositions her, with a kid from the flock as payment. She asks that a token be left until such time as the goat is delivered and Judah leaves with her his seal, cord and staff. They cohabit and she conceives. She goes on her way and puts back on her widow's garb.

Judah sends the goat with a friend to redeem the pledge, but the woman cannot be found. Judah's friend inquires of the townspeople, who inform him that no prostitute has been near the town. The friend returns to Judah with the kid and informs him of the news. Three months later, Judah is told that Tamar has conceived through harlotry, and he suggests that she be brought out and burned. As she is being brought out, she sends Judah's seal, cord and staff to him through a messenger, saying that the man who impregnated her is their owner. Judah realizes that it is he who impregnated her. He remarks that she was more in the right than he, since he did not uphold his end of the bargain and give her his third son as a husband. She gives birth to twins.

The Torah now returns to the story of Joseph, who is at his master's (Potiphar's) home in Egypt. God remains with Joseph and he is successful, which causes Potiphar to like him and make Joseph his personal assistant. Potiphar puts Joseph in charge of his entire household, which, because of Joseph, is successful. After a time, Potiphar's wife tries to seduce Joseph, who refuses, not wanting to sin against God or Potiphar. She continues to try to seduce Joseph day after day and he continues

to refuse. One day, she grabs him and he flees, in his haste leaving his garment in her hand. She cries out and tells both her servants and Potiphar that Joseph tried to seduce her. Potiphar is furious and has Joseph thrown in the king's jail. But even while he is in prison, God is with him and he is successful, even put in charge of the other prisoners.

Some time later, the king's cupbearer and baker both offend the king and both are put into the king's jail, where Joseph is in charge of them. One night, each of the two has his own dream and each shares his dream with Joseph, who says that God can interpret them. The cupbearer dreams of a vine with three branches of grapes, which he presses and pours into Pharaoh's cup. Joseph tells the cupbearer that the three branches represent three days, after which time, Joseph interprets, Pharaoh will pardon and reinstate the cupbearer. Joseph asks the cupbearer to remember him and mention him to Pharaoh, hoping that will get him out of prison. The baker, hearing the positive interpretation of the cupbearer's dream, tells Joseph that his dream was of three baskets on his head, the top of which contained food being eaten by birds. Joseph tells the baker that his three baskets also represent three days, but that he will be impaled in three days. Three days later it is Pharaoh's birthday and he throws a banquet for all of his officials. He singles out the cupbearer and baker, reinstating the cupbearer and impaling the baker, just as Joseph interpreted. The cupbearer, however, forgets about Joseph, who remains in jail.

Central Text(s)

- Genesis, chapter 38, verses 15-16, 18, 24-26

Essential Questions

- How does Judah not recognize his own daughter-in-law?
- Are the actions of Judah and Tamar in this story appropriate? Why or why not?
- What does Judah mean when he says that Tamar is more righteous than he?
- What do we learn from the story of Judah and Tamar?

Materials Needed

- Participant Handouts (one for each participant)
- Pens/pencils (one for every two participants)
- Blank Paper (a few pieces for every two participants)

Session Plan

Introduction:

The lengthy and exciting story of our ancestor Joseph begins with *Parashat Vayeishev*. Though we learn of his birth in *parashat Vayeitzei*, we are formally introduced to Joseph, who seems to have something of a superiority complex, when he is seventeen years old and tending his father's flocks with his eleven brothers. Joseph is his father's favorite, and what's more, shares a couple of his dreams in which he is master over his family. Understandably, his brothers are not too fond of him; so begins the tension and hostility between Joseph and his brothers.

For the most part, the fourteen chapters in Genesis that tell Joseph's story focus on him exclusively and mention his brothers only in relation to him. We know that the brothers are jealous of Joseph and sell him into slavery, leading Jacob to believe that Joseph is dead. Later, in *parashiot Miketz* and *Vayigash*, we learn of Joseph's brothers' famine-time trip to Egypt to acquire food for their family and we learn of their dramatic reunion with Joseph. Even so, we learn very little of the personal lives of Joseph's brothers. With one exception, the book of Genesis does not tell us about their wives or children, their livelihood or any experiences they have in their lives that are not somehow connected to Joseph.

As previously mentioned, there is one major exception. An entire chapter of *parashat Vayeishev* is devoted to the story of Judah, the fourth eldest of Jacob's sons. We learn that Judah marries and has three sons. But that's not all. We learn that Judah provides for his first son a wife named Tamar. We learn that, upon his death, she is married to Judah's second son, who also dies. Judah asks

Tamar to return to her father's house and live as a widow until such time as the third son becomes eligible for her to marry. Tamar holds up her end of the bargain, but Judah never gives Tamar his third son. Not wanting to remain alone and childless forever, Tamar takes matters into her own hands. What ensues is a scandalous story filled with deceit, trickery and desire.

In the text, the story of Judah and Tamar is placed smack dab in the midst of the story of Joseph. The question is: why is this story included in the text? Not only are stories about the lives of the other brothers absent, but the careful chronology of Joseph's story is dramatically interrupted by a story that takes place over several years. Biblical readers and scholars alike have been asking this question for centuries and have come up with several possibilities. One possibility is that this union between Tamar and Judah will, after many generations, result in the birth of the messiah. We learn in the book of Ruth²⁰ that Perez²¹ is an ancestor of King David, from whose line it is said the messiah will descend. Another possibility is that this story is meant to show the reader how Judah's character has changed over time, since he is the brother who will ultimately plead with Joseph on behalf of all the brothers, provoking Joseph to reveal his true identity to his brothers.

Though we will never know exactly why Judah's story is included in the narrative, we have much to learn from this fascinating tale. By studying the text and the commentator's interpretations of the text, we will come to understand how it is that Judah did not recognize his daughter-in-law, how the sages and scholars feel about Judah and Tamar's actions, who was in the right (or more in the right), as well as what we, the modern reader, can learn from the saga of Judah and Tamar.

Opening Activity (10 minutes)

Welcome participants and, if they do not know each other, ask them to introduce themselves.

Tell participants that though *parashat Vayeishev* begins the story of our ancestor Joseph, it also includes the shocking story of Joseph's brother, Judah. Judah's story, told in one chapter of the book

²⁰ Chapter 4:18-22

²¹ The first-born of Judah and Tamar's twin sons

of Genesis²², is filled with drama and intrigue and leaves many questions unanswered. The character of the story's players is called into question, as are the actions the characters choose to take and the lessons we, the readers, are meant to learn. As we read the story and learn the interpretations of the commentators, we will find that this is not a story meant to be taken at face value and then left alone. It is a story meant to teach a lesson about human interaction that is as relevant today as it was in the time of the Bible.

The source of the conflict in this story is a promise not kept and the resulting action and reaction. Ask participants to take a moment to think of a time in their lives when someone made a promise to them that was not kept. Once they have had a few minutes to think, ask them to divide themselves into *chevruta* groups and share their stories. Suggest that they answer the following questions:

- What were the circumstances surrounding the promise? What was the promise?
- How would it have affected you if the promise was not kept?
- At what point did you realize that the promise was not going to be kept? How did that realization make you feel?
- What did you do when you found out the promise was not going to be kept?
- What action did you take to hold the promise maker accountable for his or her broken promise?

Once participants have had a chance to share their stories with their *chevruta*, invite them to rejoin the group. Explain that in today's session, we will learn the story of Judah and Tamar. Judah made a promise to Tamar that he did not keep and, as a result, Tamar took certain actions. By thinking of a time in our own lives when a promise made to us was broken, and by recalling how we felt at that time, we are better able to understand Tamar's feelings and identify with her actions.

Read the Text (10 minutes)

Give each participant a copy of the participant handout. Ask a member of the group to read Genesis, chapter 38, verses 15-16, 18, 24-26, plus the italicized introduction, aloud and then summarize it for the group. Discuss the following with participants:

- What is your initial reaction to the text? What strikes you about this text?
- What questions does this text raise for you?
- How do you feel about Judah's treatment of Tamar throughout the story? How does it change?
- How do you feel about Tamar's treatment of Judah throughout the story? How does it change?
- Why does Judah say that Tamar is "more in the right" than he?
- Why do you think this story is included in Torah?

The story of Judah and Tamar is a curious story. Its telling interrupts the story of Joseph at a very dramatic point, leaving us to wonder what happens to Joseph after his arrival as a slave in Egypt. The moral scruples exhibited by the main characters in this story are questionable and there are some very confusing aspects of the story. For example, why is it that Judah does not keep his promise to Tamar? Why does Tamar choose to disguise herself instead of approaching Judah directly? The litany of questions could go on and on. For the purposes of this study, we will focus on three questions. First, we will look briefly at why Judah did not recognize his own daughter-in-law. Secondly, we will look at the actions of both Judah and Tamar and draw conclusions about the morality of each. Finally, we will draw conclusions about what the story is trying to teach us, the modern reader.

He Did Not Know Her? (10 minutes)

Direct participants to the section in the participant handout entitled, "He Did Not Know Her?" Explain that one of the most striking features of this story is that Judah does not, at any point, recognize the woman he encounters at the crossroads as his daughter-in-law, Tamar. This would be curious even if their meeting had ended there, but based on the conversation that transpires

between the two, we have to assume that their encounter did not culminate at the crossroads.

Considering the fact that Judah and Tamar had such intimate relations, how is it that he did not recognize her? Would a face covering have been enough to hide her true identity?

Together with the whole group, read and summarize each quotation in turn and discuss using the following guide questions:

- Kimchi (“So that he did not...”)
 - Kimchi suggests that however she covered her face, she did it in such a way that Judah would be sure not to recognize her. How might it be possible for Judah not to recognize his own daughter-in-law?
 - In biblical times, it was the practice of prostitutes to stand at crossroads outside of the towns, so that they could go about in their towns without shame or embarrassment. Why do you think Tamar, whom we can assume knew this, decided to wait for Judah at a crossroads?
 - Kimchi clearly believes that Judah would have behaved differently if he had known it was Tamar. What do you think he would have done or said if he had recognized her?
- Rashi (“And he could not see...”)
 - Rashi suggests that Judah did not recognize Tamar because of her modesty; saying that when she was living in his house, she always had her face covered. Therefore, even if she had not covered her face at the crossroads, he might not have recognized her.
 - If Tamar did cover her face in Judah’s house, would that make it easier or harder to identify her at the crossroads? Why?
 - What do you think Rashi means when he says Judah “did not suspect her”?

Though it does seem a bit odd that Judah does not recognize his own daughter-in-law, the events that transpire suggest that this is, indeed, the case. Ask participants: what do you think it

says about Judah's character that he does not recognize his daughter-in-law, even after engaging in conversation with her? What do you think it says about Tamar's character that she deceives Judah? And why might Tamar have gone to such an extreme, engaging in intimate relations with her father-in-law? Was Judah's behavior, or Tamar's, appropriate? Who is in the right?

Who Is Right? (40 minutes)

It seems fairly clear from reading the story that both Judah and Tamar behaved in ways that were less than appropriate. However, we also learn that Judah believes that Tamar is "more in the right" than is he. Scholars have been commenting on Judah's statement for centuries, trying to determine what led Judah to make this statement. The question is: is Judah right? Is Tamar more righteous than he?

Ask participants to rejoin their *chevruta* groups and give each group a blank piece of paper and a pen or pencil. Explain to the group that using the text of the story itself and the quotations provided in the section of the handout entitled "Who Is Right?", the group as a whole is going to engage in a debate in order to determine whether Judah or Tamar is more in the right. Ask participants to make two columns on their paper – one entitled "Tamar" and one entitled "Judah." With their *chevruta*, ask participants to read all of the quotations in this section. As they read, ask them to take notes in both columns, summarizing the actions of each character, as well as the interpreter's treatment of their actions. As participants work on the exercise, visit each group, and offer help with the interpretations of the quotations, based on the following suggestions:

- Kimchi ("She is more righteous...")
 - Judah
 - Declared Tamar guilty and punished her to death by burning
 - Impregnated Tamar, thinking she was a harlot
 - Tamar

- She was innocent of any crime
 - She did not act like a harlot
- Rashbam (“He referred to her...”)
 - Judah
 - Commanded that Tamar remain in her father’s house
 - Did not follow through on his promise to give Shelah to Tamar
 - Tamar
 - She remained in her father’s house, waiting for Shelah
- Judaica Press (“*Rabbenu Meyuchas* combines...”)
 - Judah
 - Propositioned Tamar, believing she was a harlot
 - Impregnated Tamar, believing her to be a harlot
 - Tamar
 - Impregnated by Judah
 - Approached Judah because he did not follow through on his promise
- Seforno (“Even though she approached...”)
 - Judah
 - Wanted to “gratify [his] libido”
 - Tamar
 - Approached Judah under false pretenses
 - Her deceit was for a noble cause – to perpetuate the family line
 - Immediately resumed living life as a widow after meeting with Judah
- The Torah: A Women’s Commentary (“Judah recognizes that Tamar...”)
 - Judah

- Responds to his desire
- Is deceived
- Takes responsibility for his actions
- Tamar
 - Not wholly in the right

Once participants have created their lists of Judah and Tamar’s actions and interpretations, ask them to add their own thoughts to the lists, making judgment calls about the appropriateness of the actions of each character. Then, divide the *chevruta* groups into two large groups, and assign one group to defend Judah and the other to defend Tamar. Ask each group to compile their notes and create a statement arguing for the righteousness of their assigned character. Ask each group to designate one or two people to be the spokespeople for the group. Give participants time to complete the assignment and ask them to rejoin the group as a whole.

First, ask the spokespeople from the “Judah” group to argue Judah’s case, asking the “Tamar” group to take notes regarding anything brought up that they wish to respond to in the rebuttal. Then, ask the spokespeople from the “Tamar” group to argue Tamar’s case, also asking the “Judah” group to take notes regarding anything brought up that they wish to respond to in the rebuttal. Once both groups have presented, give the groups a moment for discussion and then ask the “Judah” group to offer their rebuttal. Next ask the “Tamar” group to do the same. Once both groups have had the chance to argue and refute, open the floor for a discussion among the whole group. The goal of this discussion should be to come to a group consensus regarding which character is more in the right – Judah or Tamar?

The question of who is more right in this story is not an easy one to answer. One could argue that both characters were in the wrong and both were in the right. By analyzing the behavior of each character and how it has been interpreted, it is possible to see more clearly why each character

behaved in the way he or she did. But the question remains: why is this story told at all? What is the purpose of the story? What are we meant to learn from the story?

Concluding Activity (20 minutes)

Though we will never know exactly why this story is included in Torah, we can assume that its inclusion is meant to teach us a lesson. Perhaps the lesson is to keep your promises, but perhaps it is a deeper and more difficult lesson. Direct participants to the section on the participant handout entitled, “Lessons Learned.” Together with the whole group, read and summarize each quotation in turn and discuss using the following guide questions:

- Rashi (“She did not want...”)
 - Rashi says that, in not directly accusing Judah of fathering the child and saying, rather, that the father of the child was the owner of the seal, cord and staff, Tamar gives Judah the chance to choose whether or not to confess. This is significant because if Judah had chosen not to confess, Tamar would have died. Why do you think Tamar chose to handle the situation this way?
 - What does Rashi say is the lesson this story is trying to teach? (*That one should not embarrass another in public.*)
 - Do you agree with Rashi’s suggestion? Why or why not?
- A Torah Commentary for Our Times (“This story of Judah...”)
 - This quotation talks about the morality of Judah and Tamar and how it is portrayed in the story. What’s more, the quotation suggests that change and growth in humans is possible. Do you agree that it is possible for people to learn from their mistakes and change as a result? Why or why not?

- Both Tamar and Judah are portrayed as being honest and forgiving. Do you agree that they were both, in the end, honest and forgiving? Why or why not? Does that excuse their earlier behavior? Why or why not?
- Seforno ("Our sages have used...")
 - Seforno says that this story teaches that it is better to sin for a good cause than to do a good deed for oneself only. Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?
 - What elements of the story brought Seforno to this conclusion? (*Tamar's sin of disguising herself was for the purpose of perpetuation the line, which is, in Seforno's eyes, a "noble cause."*)
- A Code of Jewish Ethics ("It would also seem...")
 - This quotation suggests that the story teaches that it is appropriate to deceive someone who has deceived you when that deception is used to undo any damage done. Do you agree with this? Why or why not?
 - Did Tamar handle her situation in the best possible way? In what other ways might she have reacted to Judah's deception?

Once all of the quotations have been read and discussed, ask participants: with which quotation do you most agree? Why? What does this story teach us about how to respond to a promise that has not been kept? What other lessons do you feel that this story teaches us?

Thank participants for coming and remind them that Torah tells stories in order to teach us lessons about how to live our lives in the best and most righteous way possible. Though the actions and reactions of the characters in this story may seem to be somewhat uncouth, we are able to learn valuable lessons about how to react to promises not kept and what to do in times of extreme need and desperation. We are also reminded that it is possible to grow and change at any time, no matter the circumstances. Finally, we learn that while honesty may be the best policy, it is important

to consider how to be honest in such a way that the honesty will not hurt or embarrass a person who may have knowingly or unknowingly contributed to the pain or anguish of another.

פרשת וישב

Parashat Vayeishev

Participant Handout

Genesis, chapter 38, verses 15-16, 18, 24-26

(Tamar is chosen by Judah to be the wife of his first son, Er. When Er dies, Tamar becomes the wife of Judah's second son, Onan, who also dies. Judah tells Tamar to return to her father's house until his third son, Shelah, grows up, at which time he is promised to her. Time goes by and Judah's wife dies. He goes on a journey that Tamar hears about and, since Shelah has grown up and Judah's promise has not been kept, she disguises herself and sits in front of a crossroads she knows he will pass. This is where our story picks up...)

¹⁵ When Judah saw her, he took her for a harlot; for she had covered her face. ¹⁶ So he turned aside to her by the road and said, "Here, let me sleep with you" -- for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. "What," she asked, "will you pay for sleeping with me?" ¹⁸ And he said, "What pledge shall I give you?" She replied, "Your seal and cord, and the staff which you carry." So he gave them to her and slept with her, and she conceived by him. ²⁴ About three months later, Judah was told, "Your daughter-in-law Tamar has played the harlot; in fact, she is with child by harlotry." "Bring her out," said Judah, "and let her be burned." ²⁵ As she was being brought out, she sent this message to her father-in-law, "I am with child by the man to whom these belong." And she added, "Examine these: whose seal and cord and staff are these?" ²⁶ Judah recognized them, and said, "She is more in the right than I, inasmuch as I did not give her to my son Shelah." And he was not intimate with her again.

He Did Not Know Her?

WHEN [JUDAH] SAW HER...FOR SHE HAD COVERED HER FACE. So that he did not recognize her. This is why he considered her a harlot, seeing that she had positioned herself so prominently at the crossroads. Had she not covered her face, he would have recognized her as his daughter-in-law and would not have slept with her.

Kimchi on Gen. 38:15

FOR SHE HAD COVERED HER FACE. And he could not see her and recognize her. Our Sages midrashic interpretation is: because she had covered her face when she had stayed in her father-in-law's house and she was modest. Therefore, he did not suspect her (From *Sotah* 10b).

Rashi on Gen. 38:15

Who Is Right?

SHE IS MORE IN THE RIGHT THAN I. She is more righteous than I, for I had declared her guilty of being burned to death while she was innocent, seeing she is pregnant from me and has not acted like a harlot.

Kimchi on Gen. 38:26

SHE IS MORE IN THE RIGHT THAN I...He referred to her accusation (words) as compared to his accusation (words) against her. "I had commanded her to remain in her father's house until Shelah would grow up. She complied with the terms of our understanding. However, I did not keep my part of the bargain I had struck with her."

Rashbam on Gen. 38:26

Rabbenu Meyuchas combines both interpretations: She is more righteous than I, and she is pregnant from me. Tamar did not sin. She approached me because I did not give her to my son Shelah. I, however, did sin, because I propositioned her believing that she was a harlot.

Judaica Press Books of the Bible: The Book of Genesis, vol. 3, p. 489

SHE IS MORE IN THE RIGHT THAN I. Even though she approached me under false pretenses, misrepresenting herself, she still acted more righteously than I did...Her deceit was practiced for a noble cause and appears to have been approved by God, seeing she meant to maintain the seed of her deceased husband, whereas I was merely wanting to gratify my libido. Immediately she had done what she meant to do she resumed living as a widow as I had told her to do...

Seforno on Gen. 38:26

JUDAH...SAID, "SHE IS MORE IN THE RIGHT THAN I." Judah recognizes that Tamar has behaved in a more moral fashion than he has. He does not comment on his own unchecked desire, on his having been deceived, or on the sudden prospect of progeny. The phrasing indicates relativization: according to Judah, Tamar is not *wholly* in the right but is better by comparison with him. Yet this is the first reported occasion where anyone has called Judah to account for his actions; he rises to the occasion by taking responsibility for his earlier words and actions – albeit indirectly. It marks a definite step in his maturation.

The Torah: A Women's Commentary on Gen. 38:26

Lessons Learned

SHE SENT THIS MESSAGE TO HER FATHER-IN-LAW. She did not want to embarrass him and say, "From you I am pregnant," but, "From the man to whom these belong." She said, "If he confesses by himself, let him confess, and if not, let them burn me, but I will not embarrass him." From this they (our Rabbis) said, "It is better for a person to be cast into a fiery furnace than to embarrass his fellow in public" (from *Sotah* 10b).

Rashi on Gen. 38:25

This story of Judah and Tamar...contains a significant lesson about how human beings can change and grow toward honesty. Judah is portrayed as a liar who fails to make good on his promises. But he is also a person who matures. He learns from his mistakes. When Tamar confronts him with the truth, he neither makes excuses for his behavior nor continues to call for her death. Instead, he courageously admits before all his townspeople that he is wrong. And Tamar, who has been treated unjustly, forgives him rather than publicly denouncing and demeaning him. Both Judah and Tamar emerge as models of moral integrity and behavior.

A Torah Commentary for Our Times, p. 97

Our sages have used this occurrence as the basis for saying that "a sin committed for noble cause is better than a good deed when same is not performed as such but as something self-serving" (*Nazir* 23).

Seforno on Gen. 38:26

It would also seem to be permitted to deceive someone who has deceived you, in order to undo the damage...For example...Tamar, who was legally forbidden to marry any other man [because she was promised to Shelah], set out to deceive and seduce Judah into sleeping with her...She did this because she did not want to be left both unmarried and forever childless. The biblical text clearly sees Tamar's act of deception as a legitimate act of self-defense on her part (indeed, Perez, the older of the twin sons who resulted from this act of deception, became an ancestor of King David, and thus of Judaism's messianic line). Judah himself recognized that Tamar's act was justified. When he learned of her deception, he declared, "She is more righteous than I."

A Code of Jewish Ethics Volume 1: You Shall Be Holy, pp. 435-436

פרשת מקץ

Parashat Mikeitz

Genesis 41:1 – 44:17

Synopsis

Parashat Mikeitz begins with the passage of two years. Pharaoh has a dream that he is standing by the Nile, when seven handsome and sturdy cows come out of the Nile and graze in the grass. Seven more cows, these ugly and gaunt, also come out of the Nile and eat the first seven cows. The same night, Pharaoh has another dream in which seven solid and healthy ears of corn grow on a single stalk. Seven more ears grow, these thin and scorched, and they swallow the solid ears. Pharaoh does not understand his dreams and calls in all of Egypt's magicians and wise men to interpret the dreams. None are able to do so. The cupbearer tells Pharaoh of his experience with the baker, when each was in jail and had a dream that was correctly interpreted by Joseph. Pharaoh sends for Joseph, who gets a bath and a change of clothes, and comes before Pharaoh.

Pharaoh tells Joseph that he has heard that Joseph can interpret dreams and Joseph remarks that it is God, not Joseph who interprets the dreams. Pharaoh tells Joseph of his dreams and Joseph responds that the two dreams have the same meaning. Joseph tells Pharaoh that his dreams mean that there will be seven years of plenty in Egypt, followed by seven years of famine. The fact that Pharaoh had two dreams with the same meaning, Joseph says, means that the matter has been ordained by God and will be carried out. Joseph further suggests that Pharaoh find a man of "discernment and wisdom" to rule over the land and organize it during the seven years of plenty. In this way, there will be grain collected during that time and there will be food during the seven years of famine. Pharaoh consults with his courtiers and sets Joseph in charge of his court, saying that "only with respect to the throne shall I be superior to you."

Pharaoh gives Joseph the name "Zaphenath-paneah" and a wife named Asenath, who is the daughter of Poti-phares (probably one and the same person as Potiphar, who was introduced in

parashat Vayeishev). Joseph is thirty years old when he takes charge of the land of Egypt and, taking leave of Pharaoh, travels all over the country during the time of plenty, gathering so much grain that it cannot be measured. During this time, Joseph becomes father to two sons – Manasseh and Ephraim. The years of plenty come to an end and all lands but Egypt struggle to find food. During the famine, Joseph portions out grain to the people of Egypt. The famine affects all the world and word spreads that there is grain in Egypt.

Jacob hears that there is grain in Egypt and sends ten of his sons (Benjamin stays home) to go and get rations for the family. Joseph's brothers come to him to procure food and, though he recognizes them, they do not recognize him. They bow to Joseph and he remembers the dream he had long ago. He accuses them of being spies, but they proclaim that they are truly in Egypt only to get food, that they are twelve sons of the same man, though one is with their father and one is no more. Joseph again accuses them of being spies and says that all but one, who will return home and bring the youngest brother back, will be imprisoned. Joseph confines them in the guardhouse for three days and then tells them that one brother will be kept behind while the others go and get the youngest, so that it can be verified that they are not spies. The brothers remark to each other that they are being punished because of what they did to Joseph years ago. Though they do not know it (because Joseph has been using an interpreter), Joseph understands what they are saying, and turns away and weeps. Joseph comes back, takes Simeon prisoner, and orders that the others' bags be filled with grain and provisions for the journey, and their money returned. The brothers then leave Egypt.

When the brothers camp that night, they find that their money has been returned to their bags. The brothers are scared and, returning to their father in Canaan, recount the events of their journey to him. Jacob is heartbroken and Reuben promises that Jacob can kill Reuben's two sons if they do not bring Benjamin back from Egypt. Still, Jacob does not want Benjamin to go in fear that he will

meet with disaster on the journey. But the famine continues in the land and the brothers are forced to return to Egypt to get more food. Jacob still does not want Benjamin to accompany the brothers, but Judah promises to take care of Benjamin and Jacob sends the brothers, along with Benjamin, double the money they brought the first time and gifts for Joseph, back to Egypt.

The brothers arrive in Egypt and present themselves to Joseph. He sees that Benjamin is with them and sends them all to his house, instructing his steward to prepare a meal. The brothers do not understand why they are brought to the house and they are scared, thinking it is because of the money that had been replaced in their bags. They approach the steward of the house and explain the situation, but the steward says that all is well and that the God of their father must have replaced the money since the steward had received their first payment. Simeon is reunited with the brothers, who lay out their gifts and await the arrival of Joseph. Joseph comes and they present him with the gifts. Joseph inquires about his father and asks if the youngest brother is Benjamin. When the brothers answer, Joseph is overcome with emotion and hurries out to weep. He washes his face and returns to the brothers, commanding that the meal be served. The brothers eat separately from the Egyptians, each eating his fill, though Benjamin's portion is bigger than any of the others.

At the end of the meal, Joseph instructs his steward to fill the men's bags with food and to place his silver goblet in the bag of the youngest brother, along with the youngest brother's money. The brothers leave Egypt, but soon thereafter, Joseph instructs his steward to go after them and inquire as to why they stole the goblet. The steward does so and the brothers promise that they did not take the goblet. The bags are searched and the goblet is found in Benjamin's bag. The brothers tear their clothes and return to the city and to Joseph's house. The brothers present themselves to Joseph, saying that he should do with them what he wishes. Joseph says that all may leave, except Benjamin, who will become Joseph's slave, for it was in his bag that the goblet was found.

Central Text(s)

- Genesis, chapter 42, verses 6-10 and 18-20
- Genesis, chapter 43, verses 11-14
- Genesis, chapter 44, verses 1-4, 6-7 and 11-17

Essential Questions

- Why does Joseph pretend that he does not recognize his brothers?
- Why does Joseph act the way he does toward his brothers?
- Is Joseph justified in his actions against his brothers? Why or why not?
- Is it okay to bear a grudge or take revenge against another? Why or why not?

Materials Needed

- Participant Handouts (one for each participant)
- Pens/pencils (one for each participant)
- Blank Paper (one for each participant)
- Flip chart, chalk board or white board
- Markers, chalk or dry erase markers (to correspond with above)

Session Plan

Introduction:

Parashat Mikeitz continues the saga of Joseph's life and his reunion with his brothers. In this part of the story, we learn of Joseph's rise to power in Egypt, his saving the land (and the world) from a severe famine and his first meeting with his brothers after their treatment of him as a youth.²³ When his brothers come to Egypt in search of food, he recognizes them, though they do not recognize him. Rather than reveal his true identity to them, he toys with them, accusing them of being spies and setting them up to appear as thieves.

²³ When they threw him in a pit and subsequently sold him into slavery (Gen. 12-36).

Considering what his brothers did to him – selling him into slavery and telling his father that he was dead – it seems understandable that Joseph bears a grudge against his brothers and seeks revenge. But in the passing years, Joseph has risen to a position of great power and it seems that his life is a good one. He rules over all of Egypt and only Pharaoh has more power than does he. He is married, with two sons, and has the world at his fingertips. Considering his immense success, one must ask why does he find it necessary to act the way he does toward his brothers? Is this the way that family should behave toward each other? Are Joseph's actions toward his brothers understandable and, therefore, excusable? And, is it, according to Jewish law and tradition, okay to bear a grudge and seek revenge, as Joseph does in this story?

Opening Activity (10 minutes)

Welcome participants and, if they do not know each other, ask them to introduce themselves.

Explain to participants that this session will focus on the first portion of the story of Joseph's reunification with his family. In this part of the story, Joseph's brothers come to Egypt during the great famine, hoping to procure food for their starving family. When they arrive, they come before Joseph, who recognizes them, though they do not recognize him. Joseph uses this to his advantage, engaging them in a series of tricks based, it seems, on the fact that he is still bitter about their treatment of him in his youth. At first glance, it appears that Joseph harbors ill feelings toward his brothers, bearing a grudge and seeking revenge.

Ask participants to divide themselves into *chevruta* groups and take a moment to think about a time in their lives when someone wronged them and, for a long time afterward, they harbored ill feelings toward that person, bearing a grudge and perhaps hoping for revenge. As participants tell their stories, suggest that they answer the following questions:

- What did the person do who wronged you?
- How did this experience affect you or change your life?

- Do you feel that you bear a grudge toward this person? What were/are your feelings toward this person?
- Have you had opportunity to seek revenge against this person? If so, did you take it? How? If not, if given the chance, what would you do?

Once participants have had an opportunity to tell their stories and discuss the above questions with their *chevruta*, invite them to rejoin the group. Tell participants that in *parashat Mikeitz*, Joseph, for the first time since his childhood, encounters his brothers. Joseph engages them in a series of frightening experiences, accusing them of being spies and thieves. For centuries, scholars have wondered why Joseph took the actions he did. Did he act out of revenge and because of a grudge he bore toward them? Or did he act the way he did for some greater purpose? And if he did act simply out of revenge, is his action excusable? Though we may identify with Joseph's seeming desire for revenge, does that make it okay? What does Jewish tradition teach about bearing grudges and taking revenge?

Read the Text (20 minutes)

Give each participant a copy of the participant handout. Explain to the group that in order to determine the reasoning behind Joseph's actions, we will need to study a few sections from this *parashah*. Tell participants that we will read each text in turn, discussing briefly as we go, and then discuss the texts as a whole unit. Taking each text in turn, ask a member of the group to read one text aloud and then summarize it for the group. Discuss each text using the following guiding questions:

- Genesis, chapter 42, verses 6-10, 18-20
 - What is your initial reaction to the text? What strikes you about this text?
 - What questions does this text raise for you?

- What actions does Joseph take against his brothers? (*Joseph pretends he does not recognize them; he accuses them of being spies; and he holds one of the brothers as a hostage, ensuring that the others will bring Benjamin to Egypt.*)
- Genesis, chapter 43, verses 11-14²⁴
 - What is your initial reaction to the text? What strikes you about this text?
 - What questions does this text raise for you?
 - What do the brothers do to prepare for their next visit with Joseph? (*They prepare themselves with gifts to bring to Joseph, as well as double the money.*)
 - Why does Jacob say that he hopes *El Shaddai* (God) disposes Joseph to mercy? (*Jacob and the brothers know that Joseph holds the power and that they must adhere to his ruling, whatever it may be.*)
- Genesis, chapter 44, verses 1-4, 6-7, 11-17
 - What is your initial reaction to the text? What strikes you about this text?
 - What questions does this text raise for you?
 - What actions does Joseph take against his brothers? (*He plants the goblet in Benjamin's sack; accuses Benjamin of being a thief; and threatens to keep him as a slave.*)

Remind participants that we have now seen that Joseph has taken three actions against his brothers. First, he acts like a stranger to them and accuses them of being spies. Second, he forces them to return to Egypt with Benjamin, leaving their father alone, wondering what will become of his sons. Finally, he plants the goblet in Joseph's bag, making him look like a thief, and threatens to keep him as a slave. Discuss the texts as a whole with the group, using the following guide questions:

²⁴ You may want to tell participants that just before this (Gen. 42:35), on their way home from Egypt, the brothers discover that the money they brought to pay for the grain has been replaced in their bags.

- How does this text make you feel about Joseph?
- What do you think Joseph is thinking and feeling during all of this?
- How does this text make you feel about the brothers?
- What do you think the brothers are thinking and feeling during all of this?
- Why do you think Joseph took the actions he did against his brothers – because he bore a grudge and wants revenge or for some other reason? Explain your answer.

Tell participants that no matter how we might justify them, Joseph's actions toward his brothers seem unfair and out of kind. But were they? Though Joseph has done well for himself, there is no doubt he has not forgotten the way he was treated by his brothers. As such, perhaps his actions really are justified and, though unfair, necessary. But why does Joseph take these actions? Is it for a self-serving purpose like revenge or to play out a grudge? Or is it for some much greater purpose?

Innocent or Guilty? (30 minutes)

Direct participants to the section in the participant handout entitled, "Innocent or Guilty?" Tell participants that scholars have devoted much time and energy to interpreting Joseph's actions and trying to determine why he did what he did. The commentators come up with many different possibilities, no two saying exactly the same thing. Some blame Joseph, saying he acted inappropriately, and others praise Joseph for doing what had to be done. What follows is a representation of some of the more commonly held opinions regarding Joseph's actions. Together with the whole group, read and summarize each quotation in this section and then discuss using the following guide questions:

- A Torah Commentary for Our Times ("Isaac Abravanel asks...")
 - Why does Abravanel say Joseph acted the way he did? (*Because he bore a grudge and sought revenge.*)

- Does Abravanel believe that Joseph's actions were justified? Why or why not? *(No, Abravanel believes that Joseph should have had compassion for his brothers since, though their actions were malicious, they resulted in much success for Joseph.)*
- Do you agree with Abravanel? Why or why not?
- Ramban ("Scripture states that...")
 - Why does Ramban say that Joseph acted the way he did? *(Because he remembered his earlier dreams²⁵ of his family bowing down to him and saw that he must now fulfill those dreams. Of the cup incident, Ramban says that Joseph simply wanted to make sure that his brothers would treat Benjamin well.)*
 - Does Ramban believe that Joseph's actions were justified? Why or why not? *(Yes, because he was obligated to fulfill the dreams. Ramban says that he was acting out of wisdom.)*
 - Do you agree with Ramban? Why or why not?
- Teaching Torah: A Treasury of Insights and Activities ("Joseph orchestrated...")
 - Why does this commentary say Joseph acted the way he did? *(He was testing his brothers to see if they had repented for what they had done to him.)*
 - Does this commentary believe that Joseph's actions were justified? Why or why not? *(While it does not make an outright judgment with regard to Joseph's actions, it seems that this commentary does feel that Joseph's actions were justified, since he was attempting to determine whether the brothers had repented.)*
 - What does Rambam define as complete repentance? *(When one finds him- or herself in the same situation, but this time, does not commit the same sin – out of repentance, not fear or weakness.)*

²⁵ Genesis 37:5-11

- Do you agree with Rambam's assessment of repentance? Why or why not?
- Do you agree with this commentary? Why or why not?
- A Torah Commentary for Our Times ("Hirsch argues [that] Joseph...")
 - Why does Hirsch say Joseph acted the way he did? (*He was testing the brothers to determine if they would do to Benjamin what they had previously done to him and to attempt to determine how they would react when they found out that he was their brother.*)
 - Does Hirsch believe that Joseph's actions were justified? Why or why not? (*Yes, Hirsch believes that Joseph's behavior is necessary in order to protect himself. Hirsch believes that Joseph acts out of wisdom.*)
 - Do you agree with Hirsch? Why or why not?

Each of these quotations offers a different perspective on why Joseph acted the way he did, as well as whether or not his actions were justified. Discuss the section as a whole with participants, using the following guide questions:

- With which commentator(s) do you agree? Why?
- Which commentator(s) do you feel is (are) way off base? Why?
- Do you believe that Joseph acted because of a grudge or out of revenge? Why or why not?
- Do you feel that the commentaries in this section left anything out? Why do you think Joseph acted the way he did?
- Do you think Joseph considered the feelings of his brothers and his father? Please explain.
- Do you think that Joseph was ultimately after revenge or reconciliation?

As is evidenced here, scholars and modern readers alike have many differing opinions about Joseph's actions and whether or not they were justified. Of the quotations we studied, only one (Abravanel) was of the opinion that Joseph acted because of a grudge or out of revenge. He is also

the only commentator of those we studied who believes that Joseph's actions were not justified. All of the other commentators were careful to separate Joseph's actions from any feelings he may have had toward his brothers' previous actions. It would seem, then, that the commentators agree that acting because of a grudge or out of revenge is less than ideal. If that is the case, are we meant to avoid these feelings? What does Jewish tradition teach about grudges and revenge?

I'll Get You, My Pretty! (15 minutes)

Direct participants to the section in the participant handout entitled, "I'll Get You, My Pretty!" Though this story of Joseph does not teach us directly whether it is permissible to act on a grudge or take revenge, Judaism has much to say on the subject. Considering the plight of the often-persecuted Jewish people, the issue of bearing grudges and taking revenge is a poignant one. What's more, as humans, we encounter situations throughout life in which people wrong us and we wish to react in kind. Judaism, however, warns us against these rash reactions. Together with the whole group, read and summarize the quotations in this section and discuss using the following guide questions:

- Yoma ("What is revenge...")
 - This quotation from the Talmud seeks to define "bearing a grudge" and "revenge." How does the Talmud define revenge? (*As giving the same negative treatment to one who has treated you negatively, simply because of their treatment of you.*)
 - How does the Talmud define bearing a grudge? (*As acquiescing to the request of one who has treated you negatively, but pointing out that the only reason you are agreeing is because you are not "like them."*)
 - Do you agree with these definitions? Why or why not?
 - What would you add to these definitions to make them complete?
 - What other examples of revenge can you name? Of bearing a grudge?

- Leviticus (“You shall not take...”)
 - In this case, the Bible is very specific with regard to what it says about revenge and grudges, but it specifies “your countrymen.” How would you interpret that phrase? Does that mean we only have to behave this way toward Americans? Why or why not?
 - The second half of this statement is one of the most well known phrases in Torah. Why do you think these two instructions are placed together?
- Genesis *Rabbah* (“Hence you must not...”)
 - This text is also clear with regard to its treatment of revenge and grudges, saying that just because a neighbor shames you, you should not do the same to him. What is the reason cited for this? (*Because humans are created in the image of God, so to shame a human is to shame God.*)
 - Do you agree with this reason for not bearing a grudge or taking revenge? Why or why not?
 - When you bear a grudge or take revenge, do you believe is it possible that you are doing the same against God? Why or why not?

Jewish tradition is very clear in its teaching that one should not bear a grudge or take revenge against another. Knowing this, has your opinion about Joseph’s actions changed? Do you now believe that Joseph acted out of revenge or because of a grudge? And, will your own actions now change as a result of learning Judaism’s views on the subject?

Concluding Activity (15 minutes)

Though we know that Judaism does not approve of bearing a grudge or taking revenge, we also know (many of us from personal experience) how hard it is to avoid these feelings. Even in the text we read today, it is unclear whether Joseph acts out of a reaction to those very feelings. When we

have been wronged, it hurts. And that hurt often develops into anger, and sometimes even hatred. Once those emotions have taken hold, it is hard to separate ourselves from them.

Ask participants to rejoin the *chevruta* groups they worked with during the opening exercise. Ask them to recall the story they shared with their *chevruta* during the opening exercise and talk about how they might behave (or have behaved differently) knowing that Judaism feels so strongly about bearing grudges and taking revenge. Once participants have had some time to discuss this, give each group a piece of paper and a pen or pencil. Ask them to brainstorm, on paper, ways in which one can separate him- or herself from these emotions and avoid acting out of revenge or bearing a grudge.

Once participants have spent some time brainstorming, invite everyone to rejoin the group. Ask participants to share their suggestions with the group, recording their answers on the board (or flip chart). Though fighting the feelings of revenge and holding on to a grudge is difficult, doing so has tremendous healing powers – not only for ourselves, but for our relationships with those who may, intentionally or unintentionally, wrong us. Point out to participants that they can add the list of strategies on the board (or flip chart) to their arsenal of ways to avoid acting on these harmful feelings.

Thank participants for coming and remind them that, like Joseph, we will all encounter situations in our lives in which we will be wronged and be tempted to bear a grudge or seek revenge. By keeping the big picture in mind and remembering that we are all human and that we all make mistakes, we can prevent these toxic emotions from overtaking our lives. What's more, we can live as better and more righteous people, always remembering that we are all created in God's image, and meant to love each person in the same way we love ourselves.

פרשת מקץ

Parashat Mikeitz

Participant Handout

Genesis, chapter 42, verses 6-10, 18-20

⁶ Now Joseph was the vizier of the land; it was he who dispensed rations to all the people of the land. And Joseph's brothers came and bowed low to him, with their faces to the ground. ⁷ When Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized them; but he acted like a stranger toward them and spoke harshly to them. He asked them, "Where do you come from?" And they said, "From the land of Canaan, to procure food." ⁸ For though Joseph recognized his brothers, they did not recognize him. ⁹ Recalling the dreams that he had dreamed about them, Joseph said to them, "You are spies, you have come to see the land in its nakedness." ¹⁰ But they said to him, "No, my lord! Truly, your servants have come to procure food[...]" ¹⁸ On the third day Joseph said to them, "Do this and you shall live, for I am a God-fearing man. ¹⁹ If you are honest men, let one of you brothers be held in your place of detention, while the rest of you go and take home rations for your starving households; ²⁰ but you must bring me your youngest brother, that your words may be verified and that you may not die." And they did accordingly.

Genesis, chapter 43, verses 11-14

¹¹ Then their father Israel said to them, "If it must be so, do this: take some of the choice products of the land in your baggage, and carry them down as a gift for the man -- some balm and some honey, gum, ladanum, pistachio nuts, and almonds. ¹² And take with you double the money, carrying back with you the money that was replaced in the mouths of your bags; perhaps it was a mistake. ¹³ Take your brother too; and go back at once to the man. ¹⁴ And may El Shaddai dispose the man to mercy toward you, that he may release to you your other brother, as well as Benjamin. As for me, if I am to be bereaved, I shall be bereaved."

Genesis, chapter 44, verses 1-4, 6-7, 11-17

¹ Then he instructed his house steward as follows, "Fill the men's bags with food, as much as they can carry, and put each one's money in the mouth of his bag. ² Put my silver goblet in the mouth of the bag of the youngest one, together with his money for the rations." And he did as Joseph told him. ³ With the first light of morning, the men were sent off with their pack animals. ⁴ They had just left the city and had not gone far, when Joseph said to his steward, "Up, go after the men! And when you overtake them, say to them, 'Why did you repay good with evil?'" ⁶ He overtook them and spoke those words to them. ⁷ And they said to him, "Why does my lord say such things? Far be it

from your servants to do anything of the kind!" ¹¹ So each one hastened to lower his bag to the ground, and each one opened his bag. ¹² He searched, beginning with the oldest and ending with the youngest; and the goblet turned up in Benjamin's bag. ¹³ At this they rent their clothes. Each reloaded his pack animal, and they returned to the city. ¹⁴ When Judah and his brothers reentered the house of Joseph, who was still there, they threw themselves on the ground before him. ¹⁵ Joseph said to them, "What is this deed that you have done? Do you not know that a man like me practices divination?" ¹⁶ Judah replied, "What can we say to my lord? How can we plead, how can we prove our innocence? God has uncovered the crime of your servants. Here we are, then, slaves of my lord, the rest of us as much as he in whose possession the goblet was found." ¹⁷ But he replied, "Far be it from me to act thus! Only he in whose possession the goblet was found shall be my slave; the rest of you go back in peace to your father."

Innocent or Guilty?

Isaac Abravanel asks: "Why did Joseph denounce his brothers? Certainly it was wrong of him to take revenge and bear a grudge against them. After all, while their intent had been evil, God turned it to good. It is true that he had suffered years in jail, but he had also emerged as one of the most powerful leaders of Egypt. None of his good fortune would have occurred had his brothers not sold him into slavery..."

A Torah Commentary for Our Times, vol. 1, p. 104

Scripture states that when Joseph saw his brothers bowing down to him, he remembered all the dreams which he had dreamed concerning them and he knew that in this instance, not one of the dreams had been fulfilled. He knew that it was inherent in their interpretation that according to the first dream, at first all his brothers would bow down to him...Now since he did not see Benjamin with them, he conceived of the strategy of devising a charge against them so that they would also bring his brother Benjamin to him, in order to first fulfill the first dream... Also, the second matter, which he effected against them in connection with the goblet, is not to be interpreted as if his intention was to cause them anguish, but rather because he suspected that they might hate Benjamin...on account of his father's love for him, just as they were jealous of Joseph...Therefore, Joseph did not wish Benjamin to travel with them until he had tested their love for him, lest they harm him...I say that all these acts of Joseph are accounted for by his wisdom in the interpretation of the dreams.

Ramban on Gen. 42:9

Joseph orchestrated a series of events which greatly frightened his brothers. What purpose other than revenge was Joseph aiming at? Several commentators have stated that Joseph wished to test his brothers and allow them to repent of their actions against him. As Rambam explains (based on *Yoma* 86b): “What constitutes complete repentance? One who is confronted by the identical thing wherein he transgressed and it lies within his power to commit the transgression again, but he does not succumb out of repentance, and not out of fear or weakness.”

Teaching Torah: A Treasury of Insights and Activities, p. 66

Hirsch argues [that] Joseph put his brothers to the test in order to determine two important matters: *First*, he wanted to know if they would do to Benjamin what they had done to him. If so, then he could neither forgive nor trust them. *Second*, he needed to test how they would react when, and if, he, as a ruler of Egypt, revealed himself as their brother...Hirsch calls Joseph’s treatment of his brothers and father “unavoidable.” He justifies Joseph’s withholding his identity from his brothers...as *necessary*. Joseph...had to protect himself... He had to be certain that his brothers could be trusted and that they were no longer out to destroy him. He had to test them. Joseph, says Hirsch, acted out of wisdom, not out of spite or revenge.

A Torah Commentary for Our Times, vol. 1, p. 105

I’ll Get You, My Pretty!

What is revenge and what is bearing a grudge? If one said to his fellow: “Lend me your sickle,” and he replied “No,” and tomorrow the second comes [to the first] and says: “Lend me your axe!” and he replies: “I will not lend it to you, just as you would not lend me your sickle” — that is revenge. And what is bearing a grudge? If one says to his fellow: “Lend me your axe,” he replies “No,” and on the morrow the second asks: “Lend me your garment,” and he answers: “Here it is. I am not like you who would not lend me [what I asked for]” — that is bearing a grudge.

Yoma 23a

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your countrymen. Love your fellow as yourself: I am the LORD.

Leviticus 19:18

Hence you must not say, since I have been put to shame, let my neighbor be put to shame. R. Tanhuma said: If you do so, know whom you put to shame, [for] “in the image of God He created him” (Gen. 1:27).

Genesis Rabbah 24:7

פרשת ויגש

Parashat Vayigash

Genesis 44:18 – 47:27

Synopsis

Parashat Vayigash picks up immediately with the story of Joseph and his brothers. *Parashat Mikeitz*, the previous portion, ends as Joseph threatens to keep Benjamin in Egypt as a slave.

Parashat Vayigash begins with an impassioned speech from Judah, explaining the grief of his father, Jacob, who will be crushed – perhaps even die – if Benjamin is not allowed to return with the brothers from Egypt. Judah even goes so far as to offer himself to Joseph in place of Benjamin.

Joseph, who can no longer control himself, asks all of his servants to leave so that he and his brothers are the only ones left in the room. He sobs so loudly that the Egyptians hear him and Pharaoh is notified of the news. Joseph tells his brothers who he is and inquires after his father. The brothers are so shocked by the news that they are speechless. Joseph calls his brothers forward and says again, “I am your brother Joseph, he whom you sold into Egypt...” He tells his brothers not to be distressed; that it was God’s plan that Joseph would arrive in Egypt before the brothers and save lives during the famine. He tells the brothers to hurry back to Jacob and tell him of Joseph’s position and bring the family to Goshen, where they will be near Joseph and where Joseph can provide for them during the remainder of the famine. With that, he embraces Benjamin and weeps, then kisses all of his brothers and weeps on them. Only then do his brothers regain their speech.

The news of the arrival of Joseph’s brothers reaches Pharaoh’s palace and Pharaoh and his courtiers are pleased. Pharaoh tells Joseph to tell his brothers to take wagons from Egypt, go to Canaan, and return with their wives and children, where Pharaoh will give them “the best of the land of Egypt.” Pharaoh adds that they do not need to bring their belongings as “all the land of Egypt” will be theirs. Joseph’s brothers do as is requested of them and Joseph gives them provisions for the journey and a change of clothes. To Benjamin, he gives three hundred pieces of silver and

several changes of clothes. To his father, he sends several gifts from Egypt, as well as provisions for the journey. He sends his brothers off on their journey, warning them not to quarrel along the way. The brothers return to Canaan and tell Jacob that Joseph is not only alive, but the ruler of Egypt. Jacob's heart goes numb because he does not believe them, but when he sees all that they have brought from Egypt, he is revived and requests to go to Egypt before his death to see his son.

So Israel (Jacob) sets out on his journey to Egypt, stopping in Beer-sheba where he offers sacrifices to God. In a night vision, God calls to Jacob and tells him to go to Egypt, where he will become a great nation. Jacob and his sons travel, with their families, belongings and wealth, to Egypt. The Torah then lists by name each of the descendants of Jacob, seventy Israelites in total, who come to Egypt.

Judah goes ahead of Jacob to point the way to Goshen. When Joseph learns of their impending arrival, he goes to Goshen to meet his father, embracing him and weeping. Israel tells Joseph that he can now die, as he has seen Joseph alive. Joseph tells his family that he is going to tell Pharaoh of their arrival and also tell him that they are shepherds. Joseph instructs them also to tell Pharaoh that they (and their fathers before them) are shepherds, so that they may stay in the region, as shepherds are abhorrent to Egyptians. Joseph tells Pharaoh that his family has arrived and brings a few of his brothers to meet Pharaoh. Pharaoh tells them that they may settle in the best part of the land and requests that they put their capable men in charge of his livestock. Joseph brings his father to meet Pharaoh, who asks him his age. Jacob tells Pharaoh that he is one hundred and thirty, bids Pharaoh farewell and leaves his presence. Joseph settles his family in the choicest part of the land of Egypt, in the region of Rameses, and sustains them all with bread.

There is no bread left in all the world and Joseph collects all the money from the lands of Egypt and Canaan as payment for the rations. Joseph brings the money to Pharaoh's palace, until there is no money left. Still, the people ask for bread and Joseph tells them to bring their livestock as

payment instead. The year ends and the people no longer have livestock to trade for bread, so they offer Joseph their persons and their farmlands in exchange for bread. The people become serfs to Pharaoh, and Joseph, on behalf of Pharaoh, gains possession of all the farmland in Egypt. He removes the population from one end of Egypt to the other, with the exception of the land of the priests, who have an allotment from Pharaoh. Joseph gives the people seed with which to sow the land and instructs them, upon harvest, to give one-fifth to Pharaoh and keep four-fifths for themselves. The people are grateful and the matter is made law in the land of Egypt. Israel settles in Egypt, in the region of Goshen, acquires great holdings, is fertile and increases greatly.

Central Text(s)

- Genesis, chapter 45, verses 1-15

Essential Questions

- How does Joseph prove to his brothers that he is really Joseph?
- What does Joseph believe is the purpose for the events that took place?
- How do Joseph's brothers know that he forgave them?
- What lessons can we learn about forgiveness from the story of Joseph and his brothers?

Materials Needed

- Participant Handouts (one for each participant)
- Pens/pencils (one for each participant)
- Blank Paper (one for each participant)

Session Plan

Introduction:

Parashat Vayigash continues one of the most dramatic and emotional stories in all of Torah. In the previous *parasha*, *Mikeitz*, we learn that Joseph planted a goblet in his brother Benjamin's bag and accuses him of thievery. He threatens to keep Benjamin as a slave, and as the *parasha* ends,

Benjamin's fate hangs in the balance. *Parashat Vayigash* begins with an impassioned speech by Judah, pleading with Joseph to let Benjamin return home and, if necessary, to keep Judah as a slave in Benjamin's place, saying that their father would not survive the loss of another favorite son. The power of Judah's speech and the repeated mention of their father prove to be too much for Joseph and, no longer able to control himself, he asks all of his attendants to leave and reveals his true identity to his brothers.

After his announcement, his brothers are speechless. Joseph hurriedly continues to talk, assuring them that he is, after all, who he says and that they should not be distressed, for it was God's plan that Joseph go to Egypt and rise to power. In this way, Joseph continues, he has been and will continue to be able to save his family from starvation during the famine. He instructs his brothers to return to Canaan, collect their father and families, and come to Egypt to live. Then, weeping, he embraces Benjamin and kisses his brothers. It is only then that the brothers are able to speak to him.

No less than three times in these fifteen verses²⁶ does Joseph proclaim to his brothers that he is who he says. It would seem, then, that they need a little convincing. How, then, does Joseph prove to his brothers that he is really he? One way in which he does this is by mentioning the fact that the brothers sold him into slavery. He is quick to point out, though, that the brothers should not feel guilty for what they have done. Why does he say this? What caused Joseph to so quickly exonerate his brothers? And how can the brothers be sure that Joseph truly forgave them? Finally, what can we, the modern reader, learn about forgiveness from this powerful and moving story?

Opening Activity (20 minutes)

Welcome participants and, if they do not know each other, ask them to introduce themselves.

²⁶ Verses 3, 4, 12

Explain to participants that the text we will focus on today contains the story of how Joseph reveals himself to his brothers. Joseph is overcome with emotion, and all but bursts out his identity. The brothers do not respond and Joseph quickly continues his speech, attempting to convince his brothers that he is really heJoseph. He brings up the past – when his brothers sold him into slavery – and ends by saying, “You can see for yourselves, and my brother Benjamin for himself, that it is indeed I whom am speaking to you.”²⁷ We know that up to this point in the story, the brothers do not recognize Joseph, and even after he says, “I am Joseph,”²⁸ the brothers still do not seem convinced. How is it, then, that Joseph ultimately shows his brothers that he is really who he says?

Give each participant a piece of paper and a pen or pencil. Ask them to pretend that they must convince an old friend, whom they haven’t seen in a very long time, that it is truly them. They have said their name, but the person is still not convinced of their identity. Ask participants to jot down a few things about themselves they might tell the person in an effort to convince them that they are who they say. They may also recall an experience or “inside joke” that only that person would remember (for the purposes of this exercise, these experiences can be made up). What identifying traits, characteristics or experiences do they have that set them apart from others and would, unmistakably, help another to identify them?

Ask participants to divide themselves into *chevruta* groups and role play this situation. Participants should take turns convincing their *chevruta* that they are who they say, using the notes they took to help. Those being convinced should not give in easily – allow each participant ample time to identify him- or herself. Once each participant has had a chance to convince the others in their group of their identity, invite participants to rejoin the group. Discuss the exercise with participants, using the following guiding questions:

- What was it like for you to come up with identifying traits, characteristics, or experiences?

²⁷ Verse 12

²⁸ Verse 3

- What types of characteristics, traits and experiences set us each apart as individuals?
- In the role-playing exercise, how did it feel that the other person continuously did not remember you?
- How did it feel when you finally gained recognition from your group?

Though the exercise we just engaged in was only a role-playing exercise, a similar incident occurs in *parashat Yayigash*. Joseph has to convince his brothers that he is really he and, in the course of fifteen verses, makes three direct statements as to his identity. But these men are his brothers, they are his family. Why is it that it takes so long for them to believe that he is truly Joseph? Commentators have suggested that perhaps it is because when they last saw Joseph he did not have a beard, where now he does. Others say that it was because he acted and dressed in the way of the Egyptians. Still others suggest that the fact that he was speaking Egyptian prevented his brothers from even contemplating the possibility that the man to whom they were speaking was their brother.

Whatever the case may be, Joseph had to do some serious convincing before his brothers believed him. Even then, there were issues and feelings among the brothers that had to be addressed and dealt with. What identifying traits, characteristics and experiences did Joseph share with his brothers that ultimately led to their recognition of him? How did Joseph handle the delicate issue of the shared experiences of their past? And, did Joseph ultimately forgive his brothers?

Read the Text (10 minutes)

Give each participant a copy of the participant handout. Ask a member of the group to read Genesis, chapter 45, verses 1-15, aloud and then summarize it for the group. Discuss the following with participants:

- What is your initial reaction to the text? What strikes you about this text?
- What questions does this text raise for you?

- Why do you think Joseph’s brothers were “dumbfounded” and unable to answer him when he revealed his identity?
- How does Joseph treat the issue of the brothers selling him into slavery?
- Does Joseph forgive his brothers? How do you know?
- What lesson do you think this story teaches about forgiveness?

Remind participants that these fifteen verses of text are almost exclusively devoted to Joseph’s telling his brothers his true identity. They seem not to believe him right away and he provides some information that he hopes will convince them. Commentators have been analyzing these verses for centuries, in an effort to answer the question – exactly what did Joseph do to prove to his brothers that he was, in fact, Joseph?

It’s Really Me! (20 minutes)

Direct participants to the section in the participant handout entitled, “It’s Really Me!” Tell participants that just as they did in the opening exercise, in this passage of text, Joseph takes pains to convince his brothers of his identity. The commentators have much to say on the identifying traits, characteristics and experiences Joseph used to prove that he was, in fact, Joseph. Together with the whole group, read and summarize each quotation in this section and discuss using the following guide questions:

- Seforno (“The one whom you...”)
 - Why does Seforno say that Joseph mentions the fact that his brothers sold him into slavery? *(Joseph and his brothers are the only ones who know of the sale.)*
 - Why is this an effective identifying factor for Joseph to bring up to his brothers? *(It constitutes a shared experience they all had together that only they would know about. Even if the buyer was present, he would have no way of knowing that Joseph was the brother of the sellers.)*

- Do you agree with Seforno's interpretation of this statement? Why or why not? Why do you think Joseph brings up the issue of having been sold into slavery?
- Rashi ("My glory and that...")
 - What identifying traits does Rashi say that Joseph used to convince his brothers that he was Joseph? *(The fact that he was in power – why would he, the second most powerful man in Egypt need or want to lie about something like this? – the fact that he was circumcised²⁹ and the fact that he was speaking Hebrew.)*
 - Do you think that these are effective identifying factors for Joseph to bring up to his brothers? Why or why not?
- Rashbam ("Whereas up until now...")
 - What identifying trait does Rashbam say that Joseph used to convince his brothers that he was Joseph? *(He was speaking the Hebrew language.)*
 - What does Rashbam say is the "principal message" Joseph wanted to get across to his brothers? *(That they had seen first-hand that he was Joseph. This first-hand account would be much more convincing to their father than a third-person story.)*
 - Do you agree with Rashbam that this was Joseph's principal message? Why or why not? What message do you think Joseph was trying to convey?
- Ramban ("The correct interpretation...")
 - Ramban suggests that Joseph is not trying to convince his brothers of his identity at all, but rather using his power to say, "I have spoken. This is how it shall be." Do you agree with Ramban's interpretation? Why or why not?

²⁹ It is believed that the Egyptians of the time did not practice ritual circumcision.

- In Ramban's interpretation of Joseph's statement, he quotes Joseph as saying, "the words I have spoken are true." Do you believe that this statement is enough for the brothers to be convinced of Joseph's true identity? Why or why not?

As we can see, Joseph is very clear with his brothers that it is actually he that is speaking to them. In addition to convincing them that he is Joseph, he also brings up the issue of the sale into slavery. He is quick to follow this statement, however, with his own interpretation of the events that took place. What is Joseph's interpretation of these events?

The Plan (10 minutes)

Direct participants to the section in the participant handout entitled, "The Plan." In mentioning the issue of the sale into slavery, Joseph enters dangerous territory with his brothers. Some commentators suggest that the reason the brothers could not speak is because they were embarrassed and ashamed about what they had done. Joseph, however, assures them that they should not worry and the events had a greater purpose that would ultimately be best for everyone involved. What does Joseph say is the reason that the events of the past unfolded the way they did?

Together with the whole group, read and summarize the quotations in this section and discuss using the following guide questions:

- Rashbam ("God has orchestrated...")
 - Rashbam suggests that God orchestrated the events so that Joseph would be able to save his family from the famine. Do you believe this to be a possibility? Why or why not?
 - How do you think this statement makes the brothers feel about their previous actions?
- Sarna ("The brothers had indeed...")
 - Sarna agrees with Rashbam, but takes his interpretation one step further. Sarna suggests that although the experience was ultimately for the good, the fact that the brothers acted with evil intent cannot be ignored. Considering the fact that, ultimately,

the sale into slavery saved the life of the family, can the actions of Joseph's brothers be excused? Why or why not?

- Sarna also suggests that God has the power to invest the sins or evil actions of humanity with good (or at least neutral) purpose. Do you believe this statement? Why or why not? How have you seen this evidenced in your own life?
- Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary ("For the third time...")
 - Etz Hayim also subscribes to the interpretations of Rashbam and Sarna. Etz Hayim, however, points out that, while in verse 4, Joseph says that the brothers "sold" him into slavery, in verses 7 and 8, he uses the verb "sent," thereby stressing the beneficial outcome of the situation. Do you agree that the use of the word "sent" instead of "sold" is meant to stress the positive of the situation? Why or why not?
 - Though the brothers' intention was evil, the end result of the ordeal was positive. Do you think that intention or result is more important? Why?

In bringing up the brothers' sale of Joseph into slavery, he not only shows them that it is really he to whom they are speaking, but also points out that, though their actions were malicious, the end result was positive and beneficial to everyone. Up to this point, however, the text gives no indication as to whether or not Joseph forgave his brothers for their actions. The question arises, then, did Joseph forgive his brothers? How do we know that this is the case?

I Forgive You (20 minutes)

Direct participants to the section in the participant handout entitled, "I Forgive You." Though the text details Joseph's words to his brothers, we are not explicitly told whether Joseph forgives his brothers for their past actions. Although the youthful and egotistical Joseph may have been insufferable, the actions of the brothers toward Joseph were harsh, and it is possible to imagine that

it would have been very difficult for Joseph to forgive them. Since the text gives no explicit mention, how are we to know whether Joseph forgave his brothers?

Together with the whole group, read and summarize the quotations in this section and discuss using the following guide questions:

- Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary (“His words are both...”)
 - This commentary suggests that in bringing up the issue of the sale into slavery, Joseph was both rebuking and reassuring his brothers. Do you agree with this assessment? Why or why not?
 - The commentary further suggests that Joseph rises to the challenge – acting brotherly even though he was not afforded the same treatment. What might this have felt like for Joseph?
- Rashi (“He compared them all...”)
 - Rashi suggests that, in verse 12, when Joseph mentions his brother Benjamin separately, he is in essence saying that just as he harbors no ill will toward Benjamin, he also harbors no ill will toward the rest of the brothers. Do you agree with Rashi’s interpretation of this statement? Why or why not?
- Kimchi (“Seeing that he had wept...”)
 - Kimchi suggests that it is Joseph’s weeping and his kissing his brothers that indicates that he forgave them. Do you agree that Joseph’s emotional reaction indicates his forgiveness? Why or why not?
 - Why do you think Kimchi finds it necessary to point out that Joseph’s brothers, once they are again able to speak, ask about what has happened to Joseph over the last several years?
- Mizrahi (“They were startled...”) **and** Tosafot Hashalem (“To express to them...”)

- The first commentary suggests that though the brothers were embarrassed by their actions, they were not frightened by Joseph. What cause would the brothers have to be frightened of Joseph?
- These commentaries taken together suggest that the brothers know that Joseph forgives them because he orders everyone else to leave the room, weeps and then kisses them. Do you believe that this is indication enough that Joseph forgave the brothers?
- A Code of Jewish Ethics (“...When others harm us...”)
- This quotation says that it was easier for Joseph to forgive his brothers since such a noble purpose came out of their sin. Do you think that it was easy for Joseph to forgive the sins of his brothers? Why or why not?
- This quotation also suggests that Joseph grew and became more humble as a result of the events that befell him. How is this evidenced in the text?
- Do you believe that we are able to grow and be humbled by sins committed against us? In what ways?

These commentators all agree that Joseph did, ultimately, forgive his brothers. Perhaps the most compelling evidence of this fact is that Joseph weeps on his brothers, embraces Benjamin, and kisses them all. Though Joseph was able to forgive his brothers, it must not have been easy for him. What lessons about forgiveness can we, the modern reader, take from this story?

Concluding Activity (10 minutes)

We have all heard the age-old adage that tells us to “forgive and forget,” yet we know that when we have been wronged, neither of these things is easy to do. Joseph, however, who has suffered a horrible wrong at the hands of his brothers, is able to forgive and rebuild relationships with them. What’s more, in not mentioning explicitly that Joseph forgives his brothers, Torah

indicates that Joseph's forgiveness of the brothers is not only understood, but obligatory. In the Talmud³⁰, we learn that we are meant to ask forgiveness from one we have wronged no less than three times. Clearly, forgiveness is an important value in Jewish tradition.

Ask participants to rejoin the *chevruta* groups they worked with during the opening exercise. Ask them to brainstorm together, taking notes if they wish, ways in which they might offer forgiveness to someone who has wronged them. One example can be seen in the text studied today. Joseph, in reframing his sale into slavery as a good thing – an experience that ultimately allowed him to save his family – is able to see the good in the actions of his brothers, thereby forgiving them for their sin. Once participants have spent some time brainstorming, invite everyone to rejoin the group. Ask participants to share their suggestions, commenting on and discussing each technique for forgiveness. Ask participants: having studied the story of Joseph and the lessons it teaches, how might it be easier for you, in the future, to forgive someone who has wronged you?

Thank participants for coming and remind them that there will be many times in each of our lives when we will have the opportunity to forgive one who has wronged us. There will also be times in our lives when we will ask for forgiveness. In recalling the story of Joseph and his brothers, and taking to heart the lessons it teaches, we may all find that the difficult task of forgiveness becomes easier. What's more, if we remember that we stand to constantly grow as a result of the hardships we experience in our lives, we might not find them so difficult to navigate and forgiveness may come sooner than we expect.

³⁰ Yoma 86a

פרשת ויגש

Parashat Vayigash

Participant Handout

Genesis, chapter 45, verses 1-15

¹ 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. ² His sobs were so loud that the Egyptians could hear, and so the news reached Pharaoh's palace. ³ Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still well?" But his brothers could not answer him, so dumfounded were they on account of him. ⁴ Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come forward to me." And when they came forward, he said, "I am your brother Joseph, he whom you sold into Egypt. ⁵ Now, do not be distressed or reproach yourselves because you sold me hither; it was to save life that God sent me ahead of you. ⁶ It is now two years that there has been famine in the land, and there are still five years to come in which there shall be no yield from tilling. ⁷ God has sent me ahead of you to ensure your survival on earth, and to save your lives in an extraordinary deliverance. ⁸ So, it was not you who sent me here, but God; and He has made me a father to Pharaoh, lord of all his household, and ruler over the whole land of Egypt. ⁹ "Now, hurry back to my father and say to him: Thus says your son Joseph, 'God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me without delay. ¹⁰ You will dwell in the region of Goshen, where you will be near me -- you and your children and your grandchildren, your flocks and herds, and all that is yours. ¹¹ There I will provide for you -- for there are yet five years of famine to come -- that you and your household and all that is yours may not suffer want.' ¹² You can see for yourselves, and my brother Benjamin for himself, that it is indeed I who am speaking to you. ¹³ And you must tell my father everything about my high station in Egypt and all that you have seen; and bring my father here with all speed." ¹⁴ With that he embraced his brother Benjamin around the neck and wept, and Benjamin wept on his neck. ¹⁵ He kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; only then were his brothers able to talk to him.

It's Really Me!

HE WHOM YOU SOLD. The one whom you have sold! By mentioning this episode you will realize that I can be none other than your brother Joseph, for who else knows about this? The people who bought me as a slave had no idea that I was the sellers' brother.

Seforno on Gen. 45:4

YOU CAN SEE FOR YOURSELVES. My glory and that I am your brother, for I am circumcised, and moreover, that it is my mouth that is speaking to you in the holy tongue (Gen. Rabbah 93:10).

Rashi on Gen. 45:12

THAT IT IS INDEED I WHO AM SPEAKING TO YOU. Whereas up until now Joseph had addressed them through his interpreter, now he demonstrated that he had a complete mastery of the Hebrew tongue. The principal message Joseph wanted his brothers to take back to their father was that they had not only heard from others about Joseph, etc., but **seen** with their own eyes, heard with their own ears that he was unmistakably their long lost brother. His command of the Hebrew language would prove this better than anything he might have heard from third party...

Rashbam on Gen. 45:12

THAT IT IS INDEED I WHO AM SPEAKING TO YOU...The correct interpretation in my opinion is that Joseph is saying, "...that I, the ruler and lord of all Egypt, am the one telling you with my mouth that I am your brother, and command you to bring down my father to me in order to sustain him. This being so, you will tell my father all the glory in Egypt AND ALL THAT YOU HAVE SEEN with your eyes, and you will hurry and bring him down to me for the words I have spoken are true, and have the power to deliver him and to keep him alive in the famine."This is analogous to saying, "for I have spoken my word."

Ramban on Gen. 45:12

The Plan

IT WAS TO SAVE LIFE [THAT GOD] SENT ME. God has orchestrated all that has happened between us for your own good so that by my providing sustenance in Egypt you will benefit from this.

Rashbam on Gen. 45:5

YOU SOLD...GOD SENT. The brothers had indeed acted with evil intent; yet behind it all had been the hidden, guiding hand of Divine Providence investing the base deeds of men with meaning and benign purpose. Joseph reiterates this conviction to his brothers after his father dies (Gen. 50:20).

Sarna on Gen. 45:5

WHO SENT ME. For the third time, Joseph repeats his understanding of the true significance of his life. He no longer accuses the brothers of having sold him but says they "sent" him, thereby substituting the beneficial result for their evil purpose.

Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary on Gen. 45:8

I Forgive You

YOUR BROTHER JOSEPH, WHOM YOU SOLD. His words are both reassurance and rebuke: I shall behave as a brother should – even though you were not brotherly.

Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary on Gen. 45:4

AND MY BROTHER BENJAMIN FOR HIMSELF. He compared them all together, saying that “just as I harbor no hatred against my brother Benjamin, for he did not participate in selling me, neither do I have any hatred in my heart against you” (from Meg. 16b).

Rashi on Gen. 45:12

ONLY THEN WERE HIS BROTHERS ABLE TO TALK TO HIM. Seeing that he had wept and kissed them they knew that he did not harbor a grudge against them and they now asked him about what had happened to him during all the years since he had left his father’s house.

Kimchi on Gen. 45:15

SO DUMBFOUNDED WERE THEY ON ACCOUNT OF HIM. They were startled because they were embarrassed over how they had sinned against him, but they were not frightened. Since Joseph had ordered everyone to leave the hall to spare them embarrassment, and since he had burst into tears, they realized that he loved them and would not take revenge upon them.

Mizrachi, as quoted in *Judaica Press Books of the Bible:*

The Book of Genesis, vol. 3, p. 566

HE KISSED ALL HIS BROTHERS. To express to them that he bore no grudge against them.

Tosafot Hashalem, as quoted in *Judaica Press Books of the Bible:*

The Book of Genesis, vol. 3, p. 569a

...When others harm us, it frequently forces us to grow in ways we would otherwise not have done.

Joseph had been arrogant as a young man, but because of the suffering he endured, he became more humble. And as a result of what his brothers did to him, he was ultimately put into a position at the court of Pharaoh in which he achieved great power and saved many thousands of lives.

(Because his brothers’ intention had been malevolent, Joseph was not required to be grateful to them; indeed, that is why he tested them to see if they had repented. But it is certainly easier to feel forgiving toward those who harmed you when their behavior unexpectedly brought you success you would not have achieved otherwise.)

A Code of Jewish Ethics Volume 1: You Shall Be Holy, p. 207

פרשת ויחי

Parashat Va-y'chi

Genesis 47:28 – 50:26

Synopsis

At the beginning of *parashat Va-y'chi* we learn that Jacob has lived in Egypt for seventeen years and that he is one hundred and forty-seven years old. When the time comes for Jacob to die, he summons Joseph to him, asks him to place his hand under his thigh as a pledge of “steadfast loyalty,” and asks him to swear that he will bury Jacob with his fathers. Joseph swears and Israel (Jacob) bows at the head of the bed.

Some time later, Joseph is told that his father is ill and takes his sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, to see him. Israel summons his strength, sits up in bed and tells Joseph that God told Jacob that God would make him fertile and numerous and assign the land to his offspring. Jacob continues, telling Joseph that Ephraim and Manasseh will now be his sons, but that any children Joseph has in the future will belong to Joseph. Israel notices Joseph's sons, inquires as to who they are and asks Joseph to bring them close so that he may bless them. Jacob's eyes are “dim with age,” so Joseph brings Ephraim and Manasseh to Jacob, who kisses and embraces them saying to Joseph that though he never expected to see him (Joseph) again, God has allowed him to see Joseph's children as well.

Joseph removes his sons from his knees and bows low. He takes Ephraim with his right hand to Israel's left and Manasseh with his left hand to Israel's right and brings them close. But Jacob reaches out with his right hand and lays it on Ephraim's, the younger son's, head and then reaches out with his left hand and lays it on Manasseh's head, crossing his hands. He blesses Joseph, asking God's blessing on Ephraim and Manasseh and praying that they become “teeming multitudes on the earth.” Joseph tries to correct his father so that the older child is blessed with the right hand, but Jacob objects, telling Joseph that though both will become nations, the younger brother will be greater than the older. Jacob then blesses them, saying, “By you shall Israel invoke blessings, saying:

God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh.” In this way, Jacob put Ephraim before Manasseh. Israel tells Joseph that Israel is going to die, but that God will be with Joseph and will bring him back to the land of his fathers. He also assigns Joseph one more portion of the land he won from the Amorites than he will assign to Joseph’s brothers.

Jacob then calls together all of his sons and, in flowing and beautiful poetry, speaks to each in turn, telling them what will befall them in the time to come and often including his feelings about the son to whom he is speaking. Jacob highlights the following in his speech to each of his sons: though Reuben exceeds in rank and honor, he is “unstable as water” and “shall excel no longer.” Simeon and Levi are taken together and portrayed as angry and vengeful men who will ultimately be divided and scattered. Judah will be praised by his brothers, who will bow to him, and he will be like “the king of beasts.” Zebulun will dwell by the sea and be “a haven for ships.” Issachar will be strong, but lazy, making trouble for the others. Dan will govern his people, but will also be vicious and backstabbing. Jacob interrupts the blessings to proclaim that he will wait for God’s deliverance. He picks up the blessings with Gad, whom he says will be raided, but will retaliate in kind. Asher will be rich and Naphtali, though wild, will “yield lovely fawns.” Joseph is portrayed as fertile and vigorous, standing firm in the face of adversity, and is the only son to be given a true blessing. Joseph is also called “the elect of his brothers.” Benjamin, the final son, is called a ravenous wolf, who “consumes the foe” and then “divides the spoil.”

Torah tells us that these twelve are the tribes of Israel, each of whom receives “a parting word appropriate to him.” Jacob instructs his sons to bury him with his fathers in the cave of Machpelah and then, drawing his feet into the bed, breathes his last and is “gathered to his people.” Joseph flings himself on his father’s face and weeps over him and kisses him. Joseph instructs the physicians in his service to embalm his father, which they do. The Egyptians mourn Jacob for seventy days and when the mourning period is over, Joseph asks Pharaoh’s court to allow him to go to Canaan

temporarily to bury his father. Pharaoh agrees that may he go and so, accompanied by his household, his brothers, his father's household and an impressive Egyptian entourage, he sets off on his journey.

When the group reaches Goren ha-Atad, they hold a "great and solemn lamentation" and observe a seven-day mourning period for Jacob. The local Canaanites see the mourning of the Egyptians and name the place "Abel-mizraim" or "the mourning of the Egyptians." Jacob's sons do for him what they promised, carrying him to the land of Canaan and burying him with his father in the cave of Machpelah. After burying Jacob, the entourage returns to Egypt.

After the passing of their father, Joseph's brothers become concerned that Joseph may still bear a grudge toward them and seek revenge for what they did. They send a message to Joseph, telling him that before Jacob died, he left instruction that the brothers should say to Joseph, "Forgive, I urge you, the offense and guilt of your brothers who treated you so harshly." In the message, they request that Joseph forgive them for their offense. Joseph is in tears as he hears these words. His brothers fling themselves before Joseph and offer to be his slaves, but Joseph tells them not to fear, as he is no substitute for God. He reminds them that although they may have intended harm, God intended that good come from their actions, and many people were able to survive as a result of Joseph's being sold into slavery. Joseph promises to sustain his brothers and their children, reassuring them and speaking kindly to them.

Joseph and his father's household remain in Egypt and Joseph lives to be one hundred and ten years-old. Joseph lives to see three generations of his descendants. Eventually, Joseph tells his brothers that he is about to die and assures them that God will take notice of them and bring them from Egypt to the land promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Joseph then asks his brothers to swear that they will carry his bones with them when God delivers them out of Egypt. Joseph dies when he is one hundred and ten years-old, is embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt.

Central Text(s)

- Genesis, chapter 50, verses 15-21

Essential Questions

- Does Jacob instruct the brothers to ask Jacob's forgiveness? How do we know?
- When is it permissible to lie?
- Why is lying permissible when the goal of that lie is to create or maintain peace?
- What is the importance of peace in life and in family relationships?

Materials Needed

- Participant Handouts (one for each participant)
- Flip chart, chalk board or white board
- Markers, chalk or dry-erase markers (to correspond with above)

Session Plan**Introduction:**

Parashat Va-y'chi tells of Jacob's blessings to Joseph's sons, his dying speeches to his own sons and his death. After his death, his sons take him to Canaan to be buried with his father and then they return to Egypt. Upon their return, the text tells us, "Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead," and became concerned that Joseph might take revenge on them for selling him into slavery in his youth. Since we know that Jacob's sons surround his deathbed and accompany Joseph to Canaan to bury their father, it seems strange that the text says, "*When* Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead..." Nehama Leibowitz points out that, "It is obvious that the text is here referring to an inward awareness of the consequences of their father's death, rather than the physical fact of his demise. They realized that all was not the same as it had been, that certain things had changed..."³¹

³¹ *New Studies in Bereshit Genesis*, p. 556

But what had changed? Why is it that just now, after all this time that the brothers have been living together in Egypt, the brothers become concerned about Joseph's feelings toward them? Legend suggests that while on the way home from burying his father, Joseph comes across the pit into which his brothers had once cast him. His brothers are afraid that this might ignite renewed feelings of hatred toward them. The same legend also says that Joseph stopped inviting his brothers to dine with him. Though his brothers thought this was because he was angry with them, in truth, it was because as the second in command of Egypt, he had to sit at the head of the table, but did not feel right doing so with Judah, who was king of the brothers, and Reuben, who was first-born.³² For whatever reason, after the death of their father, the brothers begin to be a bit wary of Joseph.

As a result, the brothers tell Joseph that before he died, their father left instruction that Joseph should forgive his brothers the offense they committed against him. But nowhere in the text do we read that Jacob learned what happened between Joseph and his brothers. Nowhere do we read that Jacob made this request. And, what's more, if Jacob did make the request, why would he tell the brothers rather than approaching Joseph himself? The question becomes, did the brothers lie about Jacob's request? Why do you think so? And, if they did lie, why, in this situation, would such a lie be permissible?

Opening Activity (15 minutes)

Welcome participants and, if they do not know each other, ask them to introduce themselves.

Explain to participants that this session will focus on the final *parasha* in Genesis, *parashat Vay'chi*, in which we learn of the death of the great patriarch Jacob. After Jacob dies, Joseph's brothers begin to fear that Joseph will finally take revenge on them for what they did to him in his youth (throwing him into a pit and selling him into slavery). In order to prevent this from happening, the brothers tell Joseph that, before he died, Jacob instructed them to tell Joseph that he (Jacob)

³² *Legends of the Bible*, pp. 262-263

wanted Joseph to forgive his brothers of their offenses against him. There is, however, no evidence that Jacob actually made this request, or that he knew what had taken place between Joseph and his brothers. Did Joseph's brothers lie to him?

Ask participants to divide themselves into *chevruta* groups and take a moment to think about times in their lives when they lied. Then ask them to narrow their thinking a bit, now recalling only times when they lied for a good cause. Ask them to share these instances with their group and suggest that they answer the following questions:

- What were the circumstances surrounding the telling of the lie?
- What was the lie? What was the truth?
- What was the reason for telling the lie?
- What would have happened if you had told the truth?
- Do you feel that, under the circumstances, it was permissible for you to lie? Why or why not?

Once participants have had a chance to tell their stories and discuss the above questions with their *chevruta*, invite them to rejoin the group. Tell participants that in *parashat Va-y'chi*, the brothers find themselves in a situation that causes them to recount an incident that may or may not have happened. The brothers tell Joseph that their father instructed him to forgive them, hoping that he will feel compelled to do exactly that.

Read the Text (10 minutes)

Give each participant a copy of the participant handout. Ask a member of the group to read Genesis, chapter 50, verses 15-21, aloud and then summarize it for the group. Discuss the following with participants:

- What is your initial reaction to the text? What strikes you about this text?
- What questions does this text raise for you?
- Why do the brothers tell this story about their father's instruction? What is its purpose?

- Does the brothers' story seem plausible? Why or why not?

Remind participants that though the brothers tell Joseph that Jacob left this instruction before he died, nowhere in the text are we given any indication that Jacob did such a thing. Nor does the text indicate in any way that Jacob knew what had taken place between the brothers. It would seem that, if Jacob did know, he would have spoken directly to Joseph rather than sending the message through the very people in question. No matter how one reads it, the story seems strange and one is forced to wonder – did the brothers lie about this wish of their fathers? Why? Was their lie permissible? Under what circumstances might it be permissible to lie?

That's A Lie! (15 minutes)

Direct participants to the section in the participant handout entitled, "That's A Lie!" Tell participants that scholars have been debating for centuries whether the brothers' story about their father's instruction was truth or lie. For the most part, scholars are of the opinion that the brothers made up the story about Jacob's instruction to Joseph. However, there are a few differing opinions and we will begin our discussion by analyzing two of these opinions.

Together with the whole group, read and summarize the first two quotations in this section and discuss using the following guide questions:

- Seforno ("He commanded that we...")
 - Seforno does not even consider the fact that the story the brothers tell could be a lie. Rather, his comment implies that the event took place and is simply not recorded in Torah. Do you believe that it is possible that this event took place and is just not recorded? Why would the Torah choose to omit the record of this conversation?
 - Seforno is careful to point out that Jacob wanted the brothers to present their concerns as coming from their own fears, as Jacob himself did not feel that Joseph was capable of

such revenge. Do you think that, if given the chance, Joseph would have taken revenge on his brothers? Why or why not?

- Sha'ar Bat Rabim ("Nowhere do we find...")
 - This commentary points out that there is no record of Jacob leaving any such instruction in Torah. It suggests, however, that the brothers interpreted Jacob's saying "Come together"³³ to mean that the brothers should be united, which requires forgiveness.

Why might unity require forgiveness?

As mentioned above, most scholars are of the opinion that the brothers lied to Joseph about the instruction of their father. The remaining two quotations in this section will expound this viewpoint. Together with the whole group, read and summarize these two quotations and discuss using the following guide questions:

- The Torah: A Women's Commentary ("...Worried now that after...")
 - This commentary clearly states that the story Joseph's brothers tell him is a lie. What evidence does the commentary give to show that the statement was a lie? *(If the story were true, Jacob would have told Joseph directly. The language of the story is too formal and, the commentary imagines, the delivery would have been shaky and even choppy.)*
 - Do you agree with this commentary? Why or why not?
- Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary ("We have no reason...")
 - This commentary also states that the brothers lie about their father's instruction. This commentary, however, offers slightly different evidence. What evidence does this commentary give to prove that the statement is a lie? *(That Jacob would have reprimanded his sons for what they did.)*

³³ Genesis 49:1

- This commentary implies that while the brothers might have passed off their story as a simple white lie, the fact that they lied in order to protect themselves (rather than another) makes their story a much bigger lie. How would you classify the lie that the brothers told? What do you think was the purpose of the brothers' decision to lie?

Though we will never know for sure whether the brothers' story is fact or fiction, the evidence that it is fiction weighs heavily. If that is in fact the case, we have (and not for the first time³⁴) an instance of a biblical character in the book of Genesis telling an outright lie. If our God and our own matriarchs and patriarchs tell lies and are not punished, why is it that we are taught from a very young age that lying is wrong? Are there circumstances in which it is permissible to lie?

Lying For the Sake Of Peace (25 minutes)

Direct participants to the section in the participant handout entitled, "Lying For the Sake of Peace." Almost all of the scholars who believe that the brothers lie about their father's instruction agree that they do so in order to keep peace in the family. It would seem, then, that even though we are taught that lying is harmful and destructive, lying for the sake of peace is permissible and sometimes even preferable. Together with the whole group, read and summarize the quotations in this section and discuss using the following guide questions:

- Legends of the Bible ("For the sake of the ways...")
 - This quotation is very clear in its message – the brothers told the story for the sake of peace. How does the telling of this story create peace in the family?
- A Rabbinic Anthology ("So great is peace...")
 - This quotation offers the same opinion, but in this case, the words are attributed to Scripture, rather than to the brothers. Why do you think this distinction is made?
- The Jewish Study Bible ("No such words appear...")

³⁴ See Genesis 12:10-19; 18:1-14; 20:1-7; 26:1-11; and 27:1-23

- This quotation tells us that the rabbis of the Talmud use this instance in Torah to rule that it is permissible, perhaps even obligatory, for one to lie for the sake of peace. Why is lying for the sake of peace helpful? How might lying in situations such as these be better than telling the truth and hoping for the best?
 - This quotation also makes a judgment call, saying that the brothers' lie is defensible. Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?
- A Torah Commentary for Our Times ("Rabbi Ishmael notes that even...")
 - This quotation specifies that lies may be told "for the sake of family peace" (and cites an example to that effect). What distinction would you make between lying for the sake of peace to a family member and doing the same to a friend or co-worker?
 - Do you agree with Rabbi Ishmael and Rabbi Nathan that lying or changing facts is an obligation if it will bring about peace? Why or why not? What conditions would you put on that statement?
- Jewish Wisdom ("In social settings, then...")
 - This quotation makes a distinction, saying that in social settings, one should lie in order to avoid hurting another. In what settings might one find oneself in which it would be appropriate to tell the truth, even if it might cause pain?
- A Torah Commentary for Our Times ("In summary, the rule for lying...")
 - This quotation offers a rule for when it is and is not permissible to lie. Do you agree with the rule? Why or why not?
 - Would you change the rule? If so, how? What would you add? What would you remove?
 - Do you agree with the statement that "creating trust and caring among family members is more important than recalling accurately all the facts of the past"? Why or why not?
- A Code of Jewish Ethics ("As a summary principle...")

- How can this principal serve as a litmus test for situations in which we feel a need to lie?
- Can you think of any examples when this rule would be incorrect or not apply?

It is clear that many scholars believe that lying for the sake of peace is permissible. It is also clear that the commentators feel strongly that this is exactly what Joseph's brothers are doing when they tell Joseph that their father instructed him to forgive them. But Jewish tradition also tells us that lying is wrong and harmful and sometimes even dangerous, and we all know this from our own life experience. In that case, what is it about peace that causes Jewish tradition to make such a significant exception to such an overarching and firm ruling?

Peace: The Most Precious Gift (15 minutes)

Direct participants to the section in the participant handout entitled, "Peace: The Most Precious Gift." One of the most important values in Jewish tradition is that of peace. In each of the three daily liturgies, we pray for peace. As a people, we are constantly striving for a time when we will be at peace with those around us. We have just learned that we are permitted and perhaps obligated to lie (a sin, which, according to rabbinic literature, denies one a place in the world to come) for the sake of peace. Jewish tradition obviously feels strongly about peace, so what is its importance?

Together with the whole group, read the quotations in this section and ask participants to react to the quotations, discussing what the quotation teaches about peace and how it makes the participant feel or what it makes the participant think about. What follows is selected background information or further explanation of each quotation. This information may be helpful in the course of the discussion of each quotation:

- Psalms ("May the Lord grant...")

- This prayer is one that is often recited or sung during worship³⁵. It is also part of *Birkat HaMazon*, the prayer recited after eating a meal.
- Numbers (“The Lord bestow...”)
- This verse is the culmination of the priestly blessing, bestowed upon the Israelites by Aaron and his sons. The blessing is used today in a wide variety of contexts.
- Isaiah (“For the work...”)
- Isaiah often preaches about the connection between worship and ethical behavior, saying that the two go hand in hand.
- Here, Isaiah suggests that righteous people seek and create peace.
- Proverbs (“Her ways are...”)
- The “her” to whom this verse is referring is Torah.
- This verse suggests that following the path of Torah will lead to peace.
- Book of Legends (“R. Joshua ben Levi...”)
- This quotation suggests that like dough, which cannot rise and become bread (is not complete) without leaven, without peace, the world is not complete.
- A Rabbinic Anthology (“R. Simeon b. Gamaliel said...”)
- This quotation is reminiscent of the more well known text from the Talmud³⁶ that teaches that if you save a single life, it is as though you have saved the world, and if you destroy a single life, it is as though you have destroyed the world.

Tell participants that, as we have seen, peace is of the utmost importance in Jewish tradition.

The importance of this value is evidenced not only in the texts and literatures of Judaism, but also in our everyday lives, in our nation, in the land of Israel and in the world.

³⁵ The Hebrew of the verse is, “*Adonai oz l’amo yiten, Adonai yivareich et amo vashalom.*” Some participants may recognize these words from their own worship experiences.

³⁶ Sanhedrin 37a

Concluding Activity (10 minutes)

We know how important peace is and we see the need for it all around us. But awareness is not enough. As we are taught, we must “seek peace and pursue it”.³⁷ On the board (or flip chart), make two columns, labeled: “world” and “family.” Together with the group, brainstorm ways in which we can bring peace into our world, recording the ideas of each participant under the appropriate heading. Repetition between the columns is okay. Once participants have come up with some ideas for how to achieve peace in the world and in their families, ask participants: how will you incorporate these ideas into your everyday life? What will you do to bring about peace?

Thank participants for coming and remind them that we will all encounter times when we will have to make choices about whether to tell the truth or a lie. In some cases, these choices will be easy and come naturally. In others, these choices will be more difficult and require careful consideration. In these times, we must remember that our ultimate goal is peace. We must remember this not only when we choose our words, but also when we choose our actions. In the words of Reform liturgy, “Grant us peace, Your most precious gift, O Eternal Source of peace. And give us the will to proclaim its message to all the peoples of the earth.”³⁸ It is up to us, in choosing our words and our actions, to bring about and maintain peace in our families and in our lives, proclaiming the message of peace whenever we are presented with the opportunity.

³⁷ Psalms 34:14

³⁸ *Mishkan T'filah: A Reform Siddur*, p. 179

פרשת ויחי

Parashat Va-y'chi

Participant Handout

Genesis, chapter 50, verses 15-21

¹⁵ When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrong that we did him!" ¹⁶ So they sent this message to Joseph, "Before his death your father left this instruction: ¹⁷ So shall you say to Joseph, 'Forgive, I urge you, the offense and guilt of your brothers who treated you so harshly.' Therefore, please forgive the offense of the servants of the God of your father." And Joseph was in tears as they spoke to him. ¹⁸ His brothers went to him themselves, flung themselves before him, and said, "We are prepared to be your slaves." ¹⁹ But Joseph said to them, "Have no fear! Am I a substitute for God? ²⁰ Besides, although you intended me harm, God intended it for good, so as to bring about the present result -- the survival of many people. ²¹ And so, fear not. I will sustain you and your children." Thus he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

That's A Lie!

YOUR FATHER LEFT THIS INSTRUCTION. He commanded that we should say what we have to say as something that originated with us and not with him, as he did not think for a moment that you might want to avenge yourselves on us. However, he consented that if we were worried, we could take the initiative and express our concerns to you.

Seforno on Gen. 50:16

BEFORE HIS DEATH YOUR FATHER LEFT THIS INSTRUCTION. Nowhere do we find in the Torah that Jacob issued such a command. It appears that the brothers found this in Jacob's command to them, "Come together," which refers to unity, and a condition for unity is mutual forgiveness.

Sha'ar Bat Rabim, as quoted in *Torah Gems*, vol. 1, p. 361

...Worried now that after Jacob's death, Joseph will take revenge on them for all the trouble they caused him, they introduce a hitherto unacknowledged deathbed speech of Jacob. The brothers claim that Jacob told them to tell Joseph that he should forgive his brothers.

The brothers' claim is implausible; why did Jacob not tell this directly to Joseph? It is better to conclude that Jacob never said this and that the brothers made it up...The language is overly formal, and one can imagine how stiffly and nervously the words were delivered.

The Torah: A Women's Commentary, p. 295

BEFORE HIS DEATH. We have no reason to believe that Jacob ever learned the truth about how Joseph came to Egypt. If he had, would he not have rebuked them for what they did, as he rebuked Reuben, Simeon, and Levi? ...Although the brothers might have justified their invention as a white lie...They shaded the truth not to spare another's feelings but to protect themselves from the possible consequences of what they had done (Genesis *Rabbah* 100:8).

Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary on Gen. 50:16

Lying For the Sake Of Peace

For the sake of the ways of peace they had invented the message; Jacob had said nothing like it...

Legends of the Bible, p. 263

So great is peace, said R. Simeon b. Lakish, that Scripture speaks fictitious words in order to make peace between Joseph and his brothers. For it says, BEFORE HIS DEATH, YOUR FATHER LEFT THIS INSTRUCTION...FORGIVE I URGE YOU THE OFFENSE AND GUILT OF YOUR BROTHERS..., and we do not find in Scripture that Jacob had given any such command, but it used fictitious words for the sake of peace.

A Rabbinic Anthology, p. 532

No such words appear on the lips of Jacob himself. On the basis of this, a rabbi in the Talmud ruled that "it is permissible for a person to modify a statement in the interest of peace." Another rabbi maintained that one was required to do so (*Y'vamot* 65b). The brothers' lie is defensible because of the good relations it ensured – a result that Jacob, on a plain-sense reading, surely desired.

The Jewish Study Bible, p. 100

Rabbi Ishmael notes that even God occasionally changes the facts for the sake of peace. He explains that, when God told Sarah that she would bear a child, she replied that it would be impossible because Abraham "is an old man" (Genesis 18:9-15). But, for the sake of peace, Rabbi Ishmael says that God lied to Abraham about Sarah's reaction. Instead of reporting that she had responded with the insult "Abraham is an old man," God reported that she said, "I am old."

One of Ishmael's students summarized his teacher's attitude when he concluded: "For the sake of family peace, even the Torah allows for misquotes or a shaving of truth" (*Y'vamot* 65b).

In the same commentary, Rabbi Nathan holds that it is a mitzvah, "an obligation," to lie or to change the facts if it will bring about peace...

A Torah Commentary for Our Times, p. 125

In social settings, then, Judaism has a pragmatic attitude toward truth. Truths that inflict hurt without achieving a greater good are forbidden...

Jewish Wisdom, p. 60

In summary, the rule for lying for the sake of truth is as follows: If you are faced with a situation that has already happened, then, for the sake of peace, you can alter the memory of it, as the brothers did about what their father had instructed them to say to Joseph. Creating trust and caring among family members is more important than recalling accurately all the facts of the past, especially when we know those facts will only hurt others and divide the family into angry factions. But, when dealing with others in business or in other negotiations, you must not lie or deal in falsehoods.

A Torah Commentary for Our Times, p. 125

As a summary principle, the contemporary educational philosopher Dr. David Nyberg applies the Golden Rule, and Hillel's definition of Judaism's essence...to the realm of lying and hurt feelings: "Be untruthful to others as you would have others be untruthful to you."

A Code of Jewish Ethics, p. 447

Peace: The Most Precious Gift

May the LORD grant strength to His people; may the LORD bestow on His people [peace].

Psalms 29:11

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

Numbers 6:26

For the work of righteousness shall be peace, And the effect of righteousness, calm and confidence forever.

Isaiah 32:17

Her ways are pleasant ways, And all her paths, [peace].

Proverbs 3:17

R. Joshua ben Levi said: Great is peace; peace is to the world as leaven is to dough.

Book of Legends: Sefer Ha-Aggadah, section 3, p. 690

R. Simeon b. Gamaliel said: He who makes peace in his house, the Scripture reckons it as if he made peace for every single Israelite in Israel; he who brings jealousy and strife into his house, as if he brought them among all Israel.

A Rabbinic Anthology, p. 530

Conclusion

It is a custom in Jewish tradition to recite the words, “*chazak, chazak, v’nitchazek*,” or “be strong, be strong; and may we be strengthened,” upon the completion of the reading of a book of Torah. During a service in which a book of Torah is completed, the congregation is asked to rise for the final *aliyah* and, upon completion of the reading, joins with the rabbi, cantor, or Torah reader in these meaningful words. Though the origins of the custom are unclear, this *minhag* (tradition) is one that is imbued with meaning.

In *Tanach*, the closest parallel to this phrase is in the book of Daniel.³⁹ In a vision, a being speaks to Daniel and tells him: “Have no fear precious man, all will be well with you; be strong, be strong!” As the being speaks with Daniel, he is strengthened and says, “Speak on, my lord, for you have strengthened me!” In a way, the words of Torah are like the being in Daniel’s vision – they teach us how to be strong and upright human beings. They remind us of how precious we are and give us comfort in our times of greatest despair. What’s more, once we begin the study of Torah, we find ourselves desiring more – in essence saying to Torah – “speak on, my lord!” Finally, in studying the words of Torah, we are strengthened and live better, more fulfilled lives.

The study of Torah is not easy. In order to fully engage with Torah, we must put in time, effort and energy. We are sometimes forced to call into question values and beliefs that we hold dear and we are compelled to grapple with difficult questions about life and living righteously. The stories in Torah are not always easy to hear or easy to understand and, as participants who engaged with this curriculum will know, struggling is an inextricable part of the study of Torah. When we finish a book of Torah, therefore, we remind ourselves and each other of the need to “be strong,” so that we can continue with the next book, the next *parasha*, the next lesson.

³⁹ 10:19

Though it is not easy, the study of Torah can give us great pleasure, if we just let its lessons into our hearts. For every story with which we grapple, there is one (or even the same story) that brings us joy and imbues our lives with new meaning. For every moment of struggle in Torah there is a moment of comfort; and for every situation, there is a response, a suggestion or a teaching. Torah is the chain that links us to our fathers and mothers, our grandparents, our matriarchs and patriarchs and each and every one of our ancestors. Torah is the chain that links us to our children, our grandchildren and the future sages and scholars of the Jewish tradition. Torah is what enables each of us to feel as though we ourselves were standing at Sinai, receiving the gift of Torah from God. For this, at the conclusion of a book of Torah, we remind ourselves and each other that, through the study of Torah, we can and will “be strengthened.”

As we have now concluded our study of the book of Genesis, I say to each of you, “*chazak, chazak, v’nitchazek*.” Be strong - in your passions, your convictions and your values. Be strong – in allowing Torah and its lessons to permeate your life, enrich your mind and inform your decisions. And may each of you be strengthened – by taking the lessons of Torah to heart and passing them on, so that you, too, may be a part of forming the unbreakable bond of tradition.

Glossary of Terms

Aggadot – parables, legends

Aliyah – the honor of reciting the blessings before and after the reading of a portion of Torah; also used to refer to a group of verses read from Torah

Beit haMikdash – the Holy Temple; first built by King Solomon and then destroyed by the Babylonians in 585 BCE, rebuilt seventy years later and then destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE; the place to which pilgrimages were made for the sacrificial rituals of ancient Judaism; said to have been the dwelling place of God

B'rit – Covenant

B'rit Milah – Circumcision; this term also refers to the ritual/ceremony that accompanies circumcision

Chevruta – small groups, generally two or three people, who engage in study together; a traditional method of studying Jewish text

Midrash – a particular type of rabbinic literature containing stories, homilies, legends and biblical analysis

Minhag – custom or tradition

Parasha/parashat – literally, “portion”; refers to one of the fifty-four weekly Torah portions read in an annual cycle

Parashiot – plural of *parasha*

Shalom babayit – literally, “peace in the home”; the phrase is used to describe the value and importance of good relations among family members

Tanach – an acronym standing for Torah, Prophets and Writings, which together make up the Hebrew Bible

Glossary of Sources

Book of Legends – A popular compilation of *aggadah* (legend) that includes most of the important branches of *aggadah*. The work was edited and compiled by Hayyim Nahman Bialik and Y. H. Rawnitzki and was first published in Hebrew in 1910.

Cassuto, Umberto – Born 1883 in Florence, Italy. Historian and biblical and Semitic scholar. Author of *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*. Died 1951.

Genesis Rabbah – Also known as *B'reishit Rabbah*. An early compilation of *midrash* focusing on the book of Genesis. Edited around 400-500 CE.

Ibn Ezra, Abraham – Born 1089 in Tudela, Spain. Hebrew grammarian, poet, astrologist and scientist. Most famous for his commentary on the Bible, which focuses on grammar and literal meaning. Death date unknown.

Kimchi, Rabbi David – Also known as R'dak. Born 1160 in Narbonne, France. Kimchi focuses on the literal meaning of the text, though he does utilize *midrash* in his commentary. Died 1235.

Mishna – the written record of Judaism's Oral Law (legal commentary on the Torah), compiled by Rabbi Judah HaNavi around the year 200 CE.

Ramban – Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman, also known as Nachmanides. Born 1194 in Gerona, Spain. Ramban was a physician by trade. His commentaries are known primarily for the depth of character analysis. Died 1270.

Rashi - Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki. Born 1040 in Troyes, France. The most prominent biblical commentator of the Middle Ages. His commentaries are known for their concentration on individual words or phrases in the text that he felt needed further explanation. They are generally concise and to the point. Died 1105.

Sarna, Rabbi Nahum M. – Born 1923 in London, England. Bible scholar and professor at several American universities and general editor of *The JPS Torah Commentary*. Died 2006.

Shulchan Aruch – legal code compiled by Rabbi Joseph Caro in the mid-1500s, still one of the most authoritative Jewish legal codes in existence.

Seforno, Obadiah ben Jacob – Born c. 1470 in Cesena, Italy. Was a physician by trade and later founded his own *Beit Midrash* (school). Best known for his biblical commentaries, which focused on the literal meaning of the text. Died c. 1550 in Bologna, Italy.

Talmud – a discussion and commentary relating to the laws of the *mishna*; two versions of the Talmud exist, one known as the Jerusalem Talmud (as it was compiled in Jerusalem) and one known as the Babylonian Talmud (as it was compiled in Babylonia); the Jerusalem Talmud was codified around 400 CE and the Babylonian Talmud was codified about a century later.

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