

Logo: Torah scroll opens to "Matir Asurim/מתיר אסורים, Jewish Care Network for Incarcerated People"

Matir Asurim ["The One Who Frees Captives"] connects Jewish spiritual, cultural, and communal resources and people experiencing incarceration or re-entry.

Divrei Matir Asurim

Matir Asurim Words/Matters-- Late May 2023

Carrying Healing With Us

May 21 begins the new month of Sivan in the Hebrew calendar. As we leave the month of Iyar, here are some words from last month's e-news. This teaching is based on a line from Exodus. Related healing language appears in an upcoming Torah portion (Numbers 12 in *Beha'alotekha*,).

Rena wrote then:

Iyar, אֵיָר, in Hebrew [*alef-yud-yud-reish*]. is often interpreted as a kind of short-hand for אֲנִי יְיָ רֹפֵאֶיךָ, *Ani Hashem Rofecha*:
"I am God, your healer" (Exod 15:26).

The Divine comforts Moses with these words during a moment of panic in the desert. Many understand Iyar to be a month where we put a little extra love and focus on the ways we want to cultivate healing in our lives. May we be blessed with the healing and wholeness that we seek at every level: personal, interpersonal, institutional, societal, and global. May we all experience the healing that we need to flourish in line with our divine nature.

***May we carry the spirit of Iyar with us
through the rest of the year.***

Launching New Journeys

Matir Asurim Torah Explorations is an experiment in sharing thoughts about Jewish topics. These first two offerings are based on the opening of the Book of Numbers. Synagogue Torah readings begin this book in late May this year. But Numbers is an important part of the Torah story to explore at any time...

Matir Asurim Torah Explorations

There are many ways to read Torah and other Jewish texts. We hope this section will offer different approaches. The two offering for this edition are built on the idea that we are all connected to the Torah.

The long Exodus and wilderness journey are a huge part of the Torah story. That story is tangled up with Jewish history and with our lives today. So, we can learn new things about the Torah by linking it with our own stories. And Torah can give us new ways of thinking about our own lives.

The wilderness story is about a group of people learning to be a community in very difficult circumstances. The story emphasizes groups and crowds:

Who is part of which group?

How does that change?

And what, if anything, do a person's groups tell us about them as a person?

How do individuals change groups and crowds?

The Book of Numbers Begins

The fourth book of the Torah begins with a census. In English, the book is called "Numbers."

In Hebrew, the name is "*Bamidbar*, which means "in the wilderness" or "in the desert."

Both titles tell us a little about what is in the book.

Numbers:

- counting
- naming
- boundaries

In the Wilderness:

- journeying
- confusion
- living in-between

Numbers/Wilderness asks us to think about individuals and communities, and how the two affect each other.

The previous book, Leviticus (*Vayikra*), focused on ritual without much story. Numbers returns to the Exodus story. It continues to follow a large group of people who, just months before, escaped from *Mitzrayim*, biblical Egypt. The big group in the wilderness includes Israelites, who were enslaved, and many other people who fled tyranny along with them.

In Numbers, the community complains a lot. And they disagree with the brother leaders, Moses and Aaron. This happened in Exodus, too. But the book of Numbers emphasizes how hard it is for God, the leaders, and the community to understand and trust each other.

The people already survived slavery and plagues and being chased by Pharaoh's army. They had some powerful, frightening experiences at Mount Sinai. And now, at the beginning of this new book, the challenges are just starting.

Bamidbar [In the Wilderness] Num 1:1- 4:20.

In the first chapter, God tells Moses to "assemble" everyone. Moses and Aaron tell the men to line up and state their family name and history.

Some men are "pointed out by name." Others are lumped in with just a family name. Only men are named. And the family line is emphasized.

Sometimes we are "pointed out by name." For better or for worse.

Sometimes we are left out of the story, for one reason or another.

How does it feel to be named? Counted?

How does it feel to be left out?

How does it feel to be identified by a group name instead of our own?

How does it feel to be part of a crowd not of our own choosing?

Turns out: Men 20+ years old are being counted as ones who can "go out in war." Before this, the people knew there were dangers ahead. They were already attacked on the way, back in Exodus. But this is the first mention of preparing for war. And the people still don't know where they're going -- only that Moses says that God has a plan.

The book just started, and already we're in pretty deep. Seem familiar? Maybe we're always "in the Wilderness."

A Little Deeper into the Wilderness

The word used to "point out" people by name, at the beginning of Numbers (1:17), is one connected with danger. (Box 1.) Being "pointed out" seems like a complicated and serious matter.

The verb used when the community "was assembled" also carries different values. (Box 2.) Here in chapter 1, the "entire community" gathers for this census. This seems to be a positive action. God commanded it, and there is no argument or negativity involved.

SPOILER ALERT!! Jumping ahead to Numbers 16. The same verb is used later when cousins of Moses and Aaron "assemble" in uprising. This ends very badly. And it's not the only serious conflict to come. There are fights over leadership and many divisions of the people. But this isn't the whole story either.

BOX 1: The verb, *nikvu* [נִקְּבוּ], is from a root meaning "pierce" or "puncture," as well as "point out" or "designate." The same word is used (Lev 24:16) for pronouncing the sacred name: "piercing God's Name [שֵׁם יְהוָה, *v'nokeiv shem-YHVH*]

BOX 2: The verb "was assembled" [הִקְהִילָהּ, *hikhilu*] is from a root (kaf-hey-lamed, קהל) with different values in different contexts.

Beyond the Wilderness

In addition to weekly Torah portions, the reading cycle includes verses from the Prophets, called the "*haftarah* reading." The *haftarah* reading for *Bamidbar* is Hosea 2:1-22.

The passage begins:

The number of the children of Israel shall be as the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured nor numbered... 'You are the children of the Living God.' -- Hosea 2:1

This verse lifts us out of the Torah story and our own. It suggests a future when divisions no longer matter, a time when everyone merges into relationship with "the Living God."

Does a vision like this one from Hosea change how we read the Torah story?

Does it change the way we read our own stories?

Naso [Take a Census/Lift Up]: Num 4:21-7:89.

This portion includes more census, this time for tribes with special ritual responsibilities. The clans counted are Gershonites and Merarites. Kohathites were already counted. All three clans are responsible for the *Mishkan*, the portable sanctuary carried through the wilderness. These clans, all Levites, do not fight in wars. Instead, they serve the *Mishkan* for twenty years (age 30-50). This portion lists their duties and where each clan camps.

BOX 3: “Gershon” ~ "exile" or "stranger."

“Kohath” ~ “assembly.”

“Merari” ~ "bitter."

Gershon, Kohath, and Merari were sons of Levy, third son of Jacob/Yisrael. So these clans are all in the Levite tribe.

The Levites camp closest to the *Mishkan*. East is the "first" direction for the Torah, so Moses and Aaron and the priests are in a place of the most privilege. They also have the biggest responsibility.

Do rigid rules about a person's place help preserve order

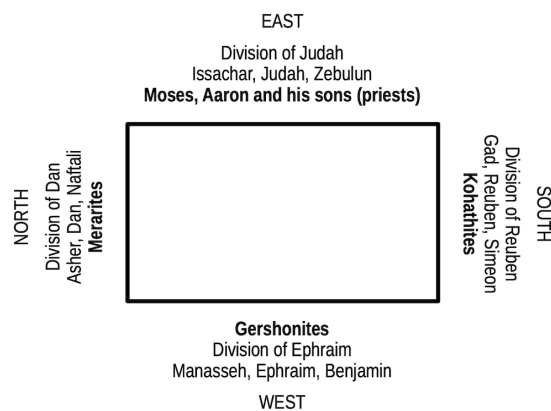
Or create bad feelings?

Can assigned places help someone feel they belong?

How does assigning places relate to "having someone's number"?

Judaism is very careful about counting people. For example, there are many customs to check if a minyan of ten is present withOUT counting. This census was commanded by God, but Jewish teaching still treats it as a dangerous activity.

In- and outside Judaism, many people are sensitive about telling someone's age and other identifying information. "Having someone's number" means having a kind of power over them. Today, IDs and credit card numbers are protected to avoid fraud. They are also regularly demanded by businesses and government institutions. Some of us are constantly identified by a numbers.



adapted from diagram in *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*. UAHJ (now URJ), 1981

ALT TEXT -- Camp image description: Center is rectangle labeled "Mishkan." EAST: outside: Division of Judah; then: Issachar, Judah, Zebulun; inside: Moses, Aaron and his sons (priests). SOUTH: outside: Division of Reuben; then: Gad, Reuben, Simeon; inside: Kohathites. WEST: outside: Manasseh, Ephraim, Benjamin; then: Division of Ephraim; inside: Gershonites. NORTH: outside: Division of Dan; then: Asher, Dan, Naftali; inside: Merarites.

The Priestly Blessing

Near the end of the portion, *Naso*, is one of the most famous passages in the bible, called "The Priestly Blessing (*Birkat Kohanim*)."

The Priestly Blessing has been part of Jewish prayer services for centuries. Some custom uses only the first three lines -- "May GOD..." -- in prayers. Some include the fourth ("Put My name...") as well.

Here is the passage in English (Num 6:22-27), followed by the blessing verses (24-27) again in Hebrew:

(22) GOD spoke to Moses saying: (23) Speak to Aaron and his sons saying: Thus you shall bless the people of Israel. Say to them:

(24) May GOD bless you and watch over you!

(25) May GOD shine [Their] face toward you and favor you!

(26) May GOD lift up [Their] face toward you and grant you *shalom*!

(27) Put My name upon the Children of Israel, that I myself may bless them.

בְּרַכְךָ יְהוָה וַיִּשְׁמְרֶךָ
יְאֵר יְהוָה פְּנֵי אֱלֹהֶיךָ וַיַּחַנְךָ
יִשָּׂא יְהוָה פְּנֵי אֱלֹהֶיךָ וַיִּשֶׂם לְךָ שְׁלוֹם
וַיִּשְׂמוּ אֶת־שְׁמִי עַל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֲנִי אֲבָרְכֶם

Y'varekhekha YHVH v'yishm'rekha
Yaeir YHVH panav elekha v'chunekha
Yisa YHVH panav elekha v'yaseim lekha shalom
V'samu et-sh'mi al-bnei yisrael va'ani avarkhem

In the Torah setting out in the wilderness, the blessing goes out in a widening pattern:

God spoke to Moses;

Moses says to Aaron and sons;

The priests (Aaron and sons) bless the people.

Commentary also explains that the priests bless the people and THEN God blesses the priests. (Babylonian Talmud, Chullin 49a). So the blessing seems to flow in several directions. It is meant to be shared. And it seems that humans have roles in sharing it.

Practice of Blessing

There are many musical settings for the Priestly Blessing, in Hebrew and English and other languages. Other music, including Bob Dylan's "Forever Young," is inspired by these words.

Jews use the blessing today, during informal and formal prayers. Practice depends on how Jewish communities understand "priesthood."

Some Jewish communities today continue to recognize Jews in three categories:

- Cohen -- descendants of priests,
- Levy -- descendants of other Levites,
- Yisrael -- Jews of other lineage.

This distinction matters, for ritual and other reasons. But many Jews no longer recognize these differences at all. Some Jewish movements specifically stress, instead, that we are all "a community of priests" (Exodus 19:6).

In some Jewish communities, the Priestly Blessing is recited only by Cohanim, male descendants of the priestly line, with assistance from men of the line of Levy. In others, practice during regular and holiday prayers varies. Some congregations recite the words of Torah (above) as part of the liturgy, but do not ask anyone to bless others. Some have the whole community share blessings with those in- and outside the room where prayers are taking place.

In addition, some communities today make creative use of the pattern in the Priestly Blessing to consider how we can all share and experience blessing

Some contemporary practices related to Priestly Blessing:

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Focus on sending blessing (by yourself or in a group)

- first to those known or nearest,
- then to more distant or unknown neighbors,
- finally, the blessing is sent out to the wider world

Focus on blessing for repair and strengthening relationship (by yourself)

- first to a loved one, with whom you have a good relationship,
- then to a stranger, with whom you have no special relationship,
- finally, to someone with whom you have a problematic relationship

Meditate on (self or group)

- being watched over or guarded
- being graced with God's face
- "putting God's name" on someone(s) to facilitate blessing

Calendar Note: Shabbat Bamidbar is May 20, 2023. Shabbat Naso is May 27 and/or June 3, 2023

Some Jews celebrate the Shavuot festival for two days. This year, the second day falls on Shabbat, May 27. So, some Jews read a special holiday portion on May 27 and then read Naso on June 3. Some celebrate only one festival day, so read Naso in two parts: on May 27 and on June 3.

Did any of the questions here spark thoughts you'd like to share?

Do you have other ideas about any Jewish readings?

Send your ideas to your penpal and/or share them with other readers.

Those without penpals can send thoughts and questions to the group address:

Matir Asurim
PO Box 18858
Philadelphia, PA 19119
matirasurimnetwork@gmail.com

Late Spring General Meeting News

Recent general meetings of Matir Asurim centered around improving communications and offering specific Jewish assistance to one individual.

On April 26, nine members gathered to discuss

- newsletter and other communications;
- helping members know one another better and learn MA history and decision-making procedures; and
- support for an individual seeking to convert to Judaism while inside.

On May 10, eleven members gathered to discuss

- newsletter and Jewish content ideas, and
- a report of the Individual Assistance small group (IASG) working to support a potential convert.

Input from members, inside and outside, is needed as this work continues. Here is a combined report:

Individual Support Request

A Jewish chaplain contacted MA in March for help to support an individual, incarcerated for life, who is seeking to convert to Judaism. MA formed an Individual Support Team (IST) to explore this. At the 4/26 general meeting, the IST reported their efforts and asked for input.

April 26 Meeting

The general meeting discussed whether MA has the ability to support this individual request. Also, if/how we could approach any future requests of a similar nature. We talked about some options for learning more about Jewish law on conversion and contacting groups and individuals who might be able to help. We also talked about some practical matters.

BOX 5: Conversion to Judaism involves a three-person court called a "*beit din*" -- pronounced like "bait" for fishing and "din," as in dinner. Members are adult Jews, with knowledge of Judaism, sometimes, but not always, rabbis.

The team is seeking to form a *beit din* at the individual's place of incarceration. The IST asked MA for financial support to allow two chaplains, who are already working with the potential Jew by Choice, to travel for this purpose. The group is seeking a third *beit din* member located nearer to the facility. The general MA asked the team to prepare a proposal explaining what is needed, and why, along with more general background for the May 10 meeting.

May 10 Meeting

At the May 10 general meeting, IST brought a proposal and a specific financial request.

The proposal begins with MA founding values, including:

- providing opportunities for those inside to explore their religious traditions, and
- envisioning a Judaism that is radically welcoming and accessible to all seekers.

It outlines how those values relate to supporting individuals, otherwise cut off from most Jewish resources and communities, in their quest for confirmation of Jewish identity.

The proposal notes that, where possible, it is best for a potential convert to connect with existing Jewish communities and study opportunities. Where this is not possible, especially if incarceration is for life, alternative paths are needed for "confirmation of commitment to Judaism."

The general meeting discussed these ideas and how to proceed with such a complicated question.

Early on in its history, MA created some consensus-based decision-making plans. An early document was shared with meeting participants. After consideration of this process and the topic of conversion, consensus was more study and a longer process would be needed. In addition, there were a number of suggestions about contacting existing networks of Jews already working on new Jewish practices and laws. Future discussion will include inside and outside members as well as others working on related issues.

Meanwhile, MA decided on May 10 to allocate funds to support the individual request, which is very time sensitive. MA approved funding up to \$2000 in travel and lodging expenses to help convene a *beit din*. These funds come from a surplus in last year's budget. The vote was 10 of 11 in favor, with one (new) member not voting.

Communication and History Sharing

At April 26 and May 10 general meetings, the newsletter editor raised some questions about content and access for the current e-news. We talked about if/how to try sharing more Jewish content, not related to holidays, by and for in- and outside members. We also discussed new possibilities for sharing information about MA activities, decisions, and how people can be involved.

MA now has an email list of 320+ receiving an electronic newsletter once/month. The current editor reported on some ideas for sharing additional material with that list and/or sending material by other means to those inside. Several members discussed requests from inside penpals who are seeking more Jewish studies material. One member of the Resources team stressed that Jewish content should be easily accessible to people without Jewish background and across many levels of education. Challenges of mailing, through postal service and email, were also discussed.

One proposal was to begin sharing some experimental pages through the penpal network. This is one way to hear directly from people inside about what is helpful and enjoyable to receive, and what more might be needed.

The e-news editor volunteered to continue working on ideas and to consult with Penpal Working Group, Inside Access Team, and MA members who have worked on communications (there is no active team right now).

Working Group and Team News

Inside Access Team

The May Inside Access meeting talked about the ideas raised in general meeting about communications TO inside members and FROM inside members.

Based on communication with inside members, the team suggested adding a newsletter section to include insider members' notes about birthdays, graduations and other accomplishments, and a prayer boost list.

Another idea was summarizing the meetings, that happen on outside video conference, for people inside. This report is one experiment in sharing such news. Inside Access and other teams will have to consider how get inside members' opinions shared with the rest of MA network.

The team considered themes, including abolition, for study materials. The issue of what is, and is not, "religious" education was raised to discuss at another time.

One specific issue raised was the idea of how to engage different communities. One team member said that surviving incarceration sometimes means disconnecting from your own agency. This means that asking questions can be problematic.... there are quite a few questions in the first experiments in "Matir Asurim Torah Explorations." Thoughts on that style of writing are encouraged.

One conclusion was that Inside Access, and expansion of communication, will have to try a diversity of avenues for including more people in more ways that work for them.

Penpal Working Group

At the May meeting, the working group reviewed current outreach efforts. Matir Asurim has been working through a network of chaplains, word-of-mouth inside, and resource mailings to let people inside know that Jewish penpals are available. The Working Group has contacted some groups with their own penpal networks to see if there is interest in Jewish penpals in particular.

The Working Group hosts a Penpal Community Hour once/month. This is advertised on MA's Instagram and through the monthly e-news. The Community Hour supports outside penpals in writing at least once/month and addresses practical issues with mail. Penpals also discuss challenges in developing relationships, handling conflict, and requests for resources.

An outside penpal asked about reimbursement for postage and JPay stamps. Funds are available on request now.

Penpal Working Group discussed ideas about how to get more information and questions, from meetings on outside video conference, to people inside, and how to get communications from inside members to the rest of MA network. One idea -- discussed in general meeting as well -- is to add more substance to the e-news and then share that inside through the penpal network. This report is an example of additional content. Another idea is creating new Jewish learning of some kind, to be shared through the penpal network to start and then more widely. The hope is that the penpal network can help find out what kind of content would be most helpful and enjoyable to inside members.

Penpal Working Group received a grant to interview people about conflict in their penpal relationships! The June meeting will consider issues to raise: what is conflict and what is transformation?

NEXT MEETING: June 11 Next Penpal Community Hour: May 21 and June 18, 6 p.m. Eastern

Membership and Wellness Team

Next Meeting: Sunday May 28th, 3pm PDT/5 CDT/6 Eastern Time.

Please email matirasurimnetwork@gmail.com for Zoom link.

Resource Team

The next holiday package will be for distribution in July, in observance of Tisha B'Av.

The Shavuot 5782 package offers poems, text study, and some visual art -- to (re)use this year.

Learn More, Get Involved

Interested in creating Jewish communities across and beyond prison walls, resourcing and supporting incarcerated Jews, and organizing for a world without prisons?

Learn about Matir Asurim's work and organizing model and how you can get involved:

- 1) New member meetings, conducted via Zoom, are organized regularly to share basics about the organization and provide opportunities to connect – for those able to use Zoom.
- 2) For those who cannot use Zoom, Matir Asurim relies on correspondence via email or postal mail. Telephone calls, and video conference if available at the facility, can also be arranged.
- 3) We are also considering a "Matir Asurim New Organizers" meeting for those seeking more detailed background on existing work and projects in need of additional attention.
- 4) Subscribe to our e-news for updates – contact matirasurimnetwork@gmail.com

The most recent new members' meeting welcomed 22 new folks. Some have joined General Meetings and Team/Working Groups.

Share Your Creativity and Questions

Holiday Packages. For each Jewish holiday, Matir Asurim creates packages of poetry, prose, images, reflective prompts and art. These packages are mailed to prisons across Turtle Island and posted to the website for download. This material is intended as points of connection and as a way to build a spiritual practice with our expansive Jewish community. Deadlines for submission are generally 3-4 weeks prior to the holiday.

Year-round Submissions. This brand new *Divrei Matir Asurim* can also share reflections on Jewish prayer and practice, words of Torah, and other thoughts on MA's work.

Questions. Do friends/family/loved ones have a question about Jewish practice while incarcerated? Send questions and we'll answer in a future resource mailing. Topics might range from the meaning of a specific prayer to how to bring in the holiday when you can't light candles, and anything in between. Submit questions via this form -- <https://tinyurl.com/shutim>. Or contact Matir Asurim. PO Box 18858, Philadelphia, PA 19119. matirasurimnetwork@gmail.com

MASTHEAD BOX:

Matir Asurim logo

Matir Asurim, PO Box 18858, Philadelphia, PA 19119 matirasurimnetwork@gmail.com

Who We Are

We are a collection of Chaplains, Rabbis, Cantors, Kohanot/Hebrew Priestesses, advocates, activists, volunteers, loved ones of incarcerated people, and people with direct experience of incarceration. We are an all volunteer group who began meeting in 2021. We live and work across Turtle Island, in territories, cities, and rural settings of the US and Canada.

Vision

We are striving toward a world free from oppression, where aspects of social identity like race, class, and gender no longer limit our safety, opportunities, and agency to live into the fullness of our sacred potential.

We are striving toward a world where individuals are mutually accountable to one another and where wrongdoing is addressed through reparative and transformative justice, guaranteeing the human dignity of all parties.

We are striving toward a world where all people are provided with the conditions for healing trauma and for *teshuvah* (repentance/restoration), surrounded by resources, guidance, and social support networks.

We are striving toward a world where nobody is isolated and everyone has opportunities to connect to something larger than ourselves—whether to community, culture, or spirituality. Within that world, we envision a Judaism that is radically welcoming and accessible to all seekers.

Divrei Matir Asurim is a publication to promote religious education and solidarity among members and all interested.

Unless otherwise noted, words of Torah for late May 2023 were provided by Virginia S., an outside member of Matir Asurim. As this experiment continues, look for words from other members.... and please consider sharing your own.

-END-