

Divrei Matir Asurim [Words/Matters of Matir Asurim] -- June 2023/Tammuz 5783

Matir Asurim: 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.

This Divrei Matir Asurim is part of an experiment in Matir Asurim aiming to share General Meeting and Team news with inside members and share inside members' thoughts with outside members. This material is available in three formats: straight text for copying into emails; formatted text for copying/printing for postal mail; and on-line in hypertext (with some internet links for those who can access them).

Divrei Matir Asurim is also divided into three parts to facilitate sharing of portions of most interest:

- 1) Meetings and Operations
- 2) Topic Digest: this month on Jewish responses to the death penalty
- 3) Torah Explorations

Inside readers, please send any responses to news shared here, or additional ideas

through your outside MA pen pal, if you have one;
by emailing matirasurimnetwork@gmail.com; or
sending through USPS mail directly to: Matir Asurim, PO Box 18858. Philadelphia, PA 19119

Divrei Matir Asurim [words/matters of MA] MEETING AND OPERATIONS

Recent General Meeting News

Matir Asurim held general meetings on May 24 and June 14. Content included regular functioning of MA, with no major votes, plus a special discussion of Jewish responses to the death penalty (separate topic DIGEST).

Tablet Resources: Research Project -- RESPONSES NEEDED

At the May 24 meeting, MA discussed resources available inside through computer tablets and if it's possible to increase offerings. A few outside members agreed to research existing content and the technology used, as well as and how facilities and states approve additional content. Inside members can help increase access for all help by

- telling us which Jewish apps and other materials on the tablet are most useful;
- letting us know if Jewish resources are hard to find, in general;
- telling us if any apps recommended by teachers, friends, or family are unavailable;
- sharing whether Jewish materials on the tablet meet your needs; and
- sharing your imagination: what is not available that you imagine would be supportive of your Jewish life?

Revisiting Decisionmaking

At recent meetings, including the June 14 General Meeting, MA began discussing possible changes in the decision-making process adopted about 18 months ago. Many newer members are not familiar. In addition, as the organization grows, consensus of the whole group may no longer be possible or the best path forward.

At the June 14 meeting, one member described how MA develops its identity through the a network of individuals and groups. It is time for some reflection on how MA's work proceeds through individual actions and and collective decisions. More to come in next General Meetings and through Teams.

Working Group and Team News

Resources Team

Tisha B'av, a day of mourning and transition, begins on the evening of July 26 this year. Resource Team is preparing a mailing for Tisha B'av, scheduled to be sent on July 12.

Packages include poetry, prose, images (printable in black/white), reflective prompts and art focused on the holiday. Connections to justice, liberation and healing are encouraged. Reflections and questions about Jewish life inside are also welcome.

These holiday packages are one way to offer Jewish spiritual care to incarcerated people and help develop community across and beyond bars.

Submissions for the Tisha B'av package are welcome submissions by July 3.

For guidelines or to submit material, contact matirasurimnetwork@gmail.com or send directly to: Matir Asurim, PO Box 18858. Philadelphia, PA 19119.

Pen Pal Working Group

Recent meetings of the working group talked about ways to share the possibility of Jewish pen pals. One area of concentration is further outreach to chaplains. Another is connecting with other inside/outside pen pal networks to share the availability of Jewish pen pals.

OVERLAP with other work:

- Finance -- MA is now regularly announcing that reimbursement is available for USPS and email stamps to help with the cost for outside members.
- Inside Access -- just beginning pilot of sharing meeting write-ups and other news with inside members to get feedback on any actions or decisions of MA
- Communications -- testing out sharing with inside members words of Torah and other Jewish content from MA's expanding monthly newsletter. Trying to gather responses from inside to shape material for what inside members want and need.

Membership and Wellness

Primary aims: **General Meetings:** Keep twice/monthly meetings happening; **Wayfinding:** Helping new and longer-term members navigate MA operations and find paths to fruitful participation.

Some additional priorities/visions are specific to outside volunteers: cleaning up on-line files, managing volunteer responses, and enhancing organizing among chaplains.

Two ideas, or possible projects, would involve inside members more directly:

- Creating "local hubs" of inside and outside members in one geographic region; and
- Developing Jewish education to support members in linking MA work with MA values.

OVERLAP with other work: As MA grows, consensus of entire membership may no longer be appropriate. What is role of membership/wellness team in helping modify MA's decision-making process? How will Inside Access and Communications be involved in facilitating decision-making?

Divrei Matir Asurim [words/matters of MA] TOPIC DIGEST: Jews & Death Penalty

Cantor Michael Zoosman is a new member of Matir Asurim, a chaplain, and co-founder of L'Chaim! Jews Against the Death Penalty. On June 14, Cantor Mike joined the General Meeting to share his work.

L'Chaim! Jews Against the Death Penalty

Cantor Mike Zoosman described how L'Chaim! Jews Against the Death Penalty came into being. Early in the Covid pandemic, in-person gatherings were not possible. So Death Penalty Action (DPA) began hosting on-line vigils when someone was executed by the state. Cantor Mike worked with Abraham Bonowitz, co-founder of DPA, to bring Jewish presence to the vigils, and together they set up L'Chaim to gather Jews to solidarity and abolition work.

When an individual has an execution date set, L'Chaim organizes messages of support and, at the same time, advocacy for clemency. The organization also establishes pen pal relationships with Jews on death row. When there is an execution, L'Chaim offers memorial prayers for victims in the case and, at the same time, speaks for an end to capital punishment. L'Chaim promotes Jewish learning related to the death penalty, shares perspectives on why abolition is a "Jewish issue," and brings Jewish views on abolition to public officials.

DPA and L'Chaim. L'Chaim organizes primarily through a Facebook page, plus Cantor Mike's personal social media accounts. L'Chaim has no website, but DPA's site offers a "JewishAction" page of resources.

DPA "works to stop executions and abolish the death penalty, to advocacy, education, and action." Bonowitz himself has worked toward abolishing capital punishment since the 1980s.

Cantor Mike, on the other hand, shares how he once favored of the death penalty. As a descendant of Holocaust survivors, he believed that people who murdered should be subject to execution. Through personal and professional contacts with incarcerated individuals, however, those beliefs shifted. Cantor Mike, like other members of L'Chaim, now opposes state-sponsored death in all instances.

Trauma and Just "Us." The topic of trauma, trauma we've experienced and inherited, came up several times in the June 14 discussion. One member said helping explore trauma, and seek compassionate responses to it, is an important part of Jewish organizing. Both MA and L'Chaim face this when organizing around issues that some people say are "not Jewish problems."

MA and L'Chaim also share struggles to communicate through prison bars. Cantor Mike, who is new to MA, said he was drawn to the effort to connect inside and outside members: "...turning '**us and them**' to just '**us**'..." But he also wonders if MA could do more to "increase the fold of people who care."

In response, longer-term members of MA spoke about various outreach approaches already tried or in the works. "Once people get involved, it opens up lived experience," one member said, "and that keeps it from being a top-down issue."

"We need both the people who are out there doing big public moves...and people working one-on-one," said another member. "There are lots of people whose hearts are in the right place but don't know what to do."

In closing this discussion, we returned to overlap of L'Chaim and MA efforts. One overlap is how death row restrictions highlight issues in our whole carceral system. As it is now, individuals on death row have less access to many resources for education and spiritual connection. This seems to suggest that individuals are entitled to support only when they are expected to "return to society."

MA has always argued, to the contrary. One of our founding beliefs is: "While people are incarcerated, those on the outside must ensure they are provided with opportunities to explore their religious traditions as part of the rights and dignities that befit their humanity."

Perhaps there are ways L'Chaim and MA can cooperate on larger education campaigns, addressing how this "is a Jewish problem." The two organizations will stay in touch.

L'Chaim's contact page is on Facebook. Death Penalty Action can be reached at PO Box 89. Ghent, NY 12075. info@deathpenaltyaction.org

Additional Topic Background

Losses in the U.S. to capital punishment in 2023:

1/3/23. Amber McLaughlin, age 49. 1/3/23. Missouri.

1/12/23. Scott Eizember, age 62. Oklahoma.

2/7/23. Leonard Taylor, age 59. Missouri.

2/23/23. Donald Dillbeck, age 59. Florida.

3/9/23. Arthur Brown, age 52. Texas.

5/3/23. Darryl Barwick, age 56. Florida.

6/14/23. Duane Owen, age 62. Florida.

1/10/23. Robert Fratta, age 65 Texas.

2/1/23. Wesley Ruiz, age 43. Texas.

2/8/23. John Balentine, age 54. Texas

3/7/23. Gary Green, age 52. Texas.

4/12/23. Louis Gaskin, age 56. Florida.

6/6/23. Michael Tisius, age 42. Missouri.

Scheduled executions:

Jermaine Cannon, 7/20 -- Oklahoma. James Barber, 7/20 -- Alabama. Johnny A Johnson, 8/1. Missouri.

-- from Death Penalty Information Center

1701 K Street NW, Suite 205. Washington DC 20006. DCPIC@Deathpenaltyinfo.org

Official Jewish Positions

Jews from many backgrounds are vocal in opposition to the death penalty. In addition, here are some official positions. Many orthodox leaders oppose capital punishment, but the Orthodox Union's formal statement (2004) is a call for a moratorium. The Reform Jewish Movement has officially opposed capital punishment since 1959.

Here is the text of the Conservative movement's 1996 resolution:

Rabbinical Assembly Resolution 1996

WHEREAS the Torah teaches that all human beings are created in God's image;

WHEREAS Jewish tradition upholds the sanctity of life;

WHEREAS both in concept and practice rabbinic leaders in many different historical periods have found capital punishment repugnant;

WHEREAS no evidence has been marshalled to indicate with any persuasiveness that capital punishment serves as a deterrent to crime;

WHEREAS legal studies have shown that as many as 300 people in this century have been wrongly convicted of capital crimes;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that The Rabbinical Assembly (R.A.) oppose the adoption of death penalty laws and urge their abolition in states that have already adopted them;

That The R.A. urge the enactment of laws that mandate that some capital crimes be punishable by life imprisonment without parole;

That The R.A. offer support and speak out on behalf of the victims of violent crime and their families;

That The R.A. encourage its members to send this resolution to their appropriate elected officials

Tree of Life Shooting (Pittsburgh, October 17, 2018) -- positions of Jewish congregations involved:

Three congregations share the building where 11 people were shot to death during Shabbat morning services. The trial was on-going at press time (June 16, 2023). Here are positions from each:

Congregation Dor Hadash (Reconstructionist). Dor Hadash issued a communal statement in favor of life in prison and opposed to the death penalty. The wife of victim Dr. Jerry Rabinowitz adds that it would be "cruel irony" to kill in her husband's name when he "abhorred capital punishment and devoted himself in word and deed, professionally, personally and spiritually, to the sanctity of life."

New Light Congregation (Conservative). Rabbi Jonathan Perlman and his wife, writer Beth Kissileff, oppose capital punishment all cases; they add that a "preponderance of Jewish law and tradition supports our position."

Tree of Life-Or L'Simcha Congregation (Conservative). No statement. Some families of victims support the death penalty (in this case).

***Divrei Matir Asurim* [words/matters of MA] TORAH EXPLORATIONS**

Still in the Wilderness

Last month, Torah Explorations introduced the fourth book of the bible, with its two names. In English, it is called "Numbers," which matches the themes of counting, names, and boundaries. In Hebrew, it is called "*Bamidbar*," meaning "In the Wilderness." This matches the themes of journeying, confusion, and living in-between.

MA's first Torah Explorations looked at the first two portions in Numbers/*Bamidbar*: The first one, also called "*Bamidbar*," verses 1:1-4:20, and the second, "*Naso* [Take a Census/Lift Up]," verses 4:21-7:89. In the very first chapter, the people "assemble" for a census and are told that the counting is meant to prepare them for war. Chapter 6 ends with the Priestly Blessing, which is part of many prayerbooks today. We leave the Yisraelites camped out, in an orderly way, around the portable sanctuary in the desert.

Beginning with the third portion in Numbers, hints of trouble turn to complaint, plagues, rebellion, and disaster.

- From a story-teller's view, the next few portions focus on conflict between groups and raise questions about who is in and who is out.
- From a faith and worship point of view, they include powerful prayer language, still in use today.
- As individuals, we might be prompted to consider who, if anyone, in the story is a good role model. Or maybe, we should look for lessons in the stories, based on mistakes or failures to communicate as well as on moments of kindness and connection:

Not needing to clutch for power, not needing the light just to shine on me
I need to be one in the number as we stand against tyranny

-- from "Ella's Song," by Sweet Honey in the Rock (Bernice Johnson Reagon); concluding song for a recent Tzedek Chicago Torah study, with R. Brant Rosen and Adam Gottlieb, co-cantorial soloist

-- A few notes about the next three portions in the *Bamidbar*/The Book of Numbers --

Beha'alotekha [Mounting/Going Up]: Num 8:1-12:16.

Lots of drama and upset in this portion. Also, lots of "gathering," for better and worse.

Gathering Lost Objects and Lost Folks

In Numbers 10:25, we learn that the tribe of Dan was "*m'assef*" or "*me'aseif*." Some teachers say this means they were last (*suf*). Others say they were "gatherers" from root "*a-s-f*."

A very old interpretation takes this literally: The people of Dan gathered anything dropped by those marching ahead of them and returned the items to their owners. Returning an object to its owner is an important *mitzvah*, commandment. So, this gives the people at the end of the line a special importance.

A later interpretation, from the 13th Century CE, says that the people of Dan gathered people who were unable for any reason to travel with their own division.....creating a kind of "found family" for folks otherwise disconnected.

Grumbling Gathering

An important example of gathering [*a-s-f*] is in verse 11:4. An "*asaf suf*," some kind of gathered group, grumbles about the food. That leads to complaint among Yisraelities. Things turns ugly, with God killing many in the camp.

Asaf suf is often translated as "riff raff" (maybe from Old French, *rif et raf*, "one and all"). Umberto Cassuto, a 20th Century scholar, uses "motley mob." The sense in many translations and commentaries is that outsiders caused trouble that spread. Some translators use the less negative "mixed multitude." This same phrase is used for the "*erev rav*," the large collection of non-Yisraelites, "a mixed multitude," who join the Exodus (Exodus 12:38).

Shelach [Send Out]: Num 13:1-15:4, and ***Korach*** [a cousin's name]. Num 16:1-18:32.

Shelach has challenging sections, including episodes of capital punishment and the story of why the wilderness trek will take 40 years. It also has an important part of the liturgy, the "fringes" verses of the Shema recitation:

Speak with the Israelites...make fringes [*tzitzit*] on the corners of their garments for all generations. They should place a thread of blue with every corner fringe....so that you do not stray after thoughts of your heart...remember to do My commandments and be holy to your God. I am HASHEM, your God, who brought you out of Egypt to be your God. (Num 15: 40-41; more on fringes in practice/prayer section below)

Work of Holiness

In the very next verse, a new portion opens with Korach arguing that all the people, are (already) holy:

"For all of the community are holy, every one of them, and HASHEM is among them" (Numbers 16:3)

Many teachers note that the "fringes" verses, in *Shelach* above, make being holy seem like a lot of on-going work: Remembering, every day. Doing commandments, every day. Every day, avoiding thoughts that lead us astray. But here Korach seems to be arguing that the people are holy (period, end of story).

But "holy" is not a permanent state of being for people or objects in Jewish thought. It's a process. Maybe Korach did not understand this or was trying to argue a different point. In any case, the "fringes" paragraph warn us that we cannot just declare ourselves or our communities "holy" and be done with it. We have individual and collective decisions to make and actions to take. Every day. All the time.

Crowds and Separation

Korach begins with an odd phrase: "Korach took" -- *va-yikach korach*:

Korach took [*va-yikach korach*]... and they rose up in Moses' face...they assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron, and said "For all of the community are holy..." (Num 16:1-3)

"Took" (in Hebrew and in English) usually has an object: He took a drink. He took a walk. He took offense. But this *va-yikach/took* has no object. So, for hundreds of years, Jews have been asking: What did Korach take?

Some suggestions link back to the "fringes." Korach took his prayer shawl, with its fringes... -- several stories follow. Other readings focus on organizing -- he took people to join him, or he took advice. Another idea is that Korach took himself off, down a path of thought and action, away from others.

Some teachers view this separation as a fault. Others give Korach credit for challenging what he thought was wrong. Teachers also disagree on whether Korach and Moses should have taken a different approach to conflict.

As it happens, though, Korach and the others with him "rose up in the face of Moses" and "they assembled [*va-yikahalu*] themselves together against Moses and against Aaron" (Num 16:1-3, again).

The verb for "assemble" uses the same root, *k-h-l*, found at the beginning of Numbers, when the community "was assembled" for the census (Num 1:18). Like the multiple uses of "*a-s-f*," the text emphasizes that people gather and crowds assemble for all kinds of reasons.... And that people and crowds change with circumstances. Just as the people are not simply holy, or not, there is no one permanent identity for an individual or a community.

--This month's Torah and photos, unless otherwise noted, from V. Spatz.

Calendar Note: Shabbat Beha'alotekha = 6/10. Shabbat Shelach = 6/17. Shabbat Korach = 6/24/23. Rosh Chodesh Tammuz = June 19 and 20, 2023. Torah study = timeless.

NOTE: The text above includes no images, text boxes, or other elements that sometimes interfere with copying for email purposes. What follows includes three images -- all related to the "fringes" theme -- plus the Matir Asurim logo. It is hoped that the text can be shared with or without the images, as needed.

As with other aspects of *Divrei Matir Asurim*, please share what is working and what might need to change.

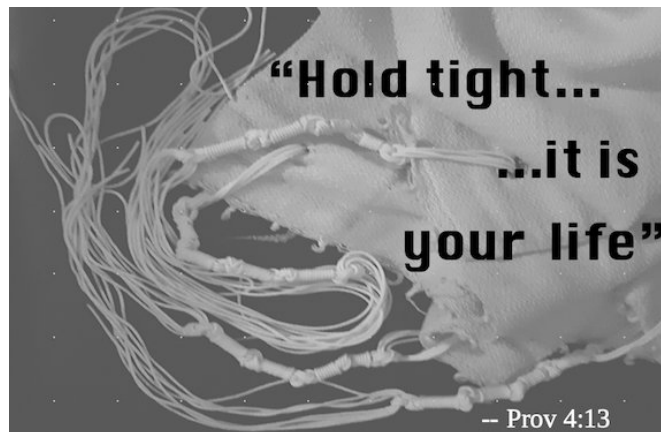


Image: fringes on four corners of a folded prayer shawl. Words: 'Hold tight...it is your life.' Prov 4:13

TORAH EXPLORATIONS: PRAYER and PRACTICE

What Will We Make Different this Year? by Jay Stanton

These words were originally part of a sermon for a newly forming Jewish community. They were given at a Kol Nidrei service on the eve of Yom Kippur [the Day of Atonement]. Note: A *tallit* [prayer shawl] is usually worn only during the morning prayer services. It is only worn at night on Yom Kippur.



Tallit (prayer shawl) corner and tzitzit (fringe)

...As a new community, we are in danger of creating margins. Some people are in the center and some pushed to the edges. This congregation has another structure in mind. My being asked to speak tonight demonstrates this structure. No one would complain if the rabbi spoke instead. We might learn something more interesting, and we might prefer it. Here, we each have a say. How many Jewish communities are being addressed tonight by a young, less-than-able-bodied, Sephardic [Jew of Iberian descent], transgender recovering addict who grew up in an interfaith household?

In any other community I would be on the fringe. That is also true here. Because this congregation is unusual in the Jewish world, our rabbi is on the fringe, too. We will function best if we're each at the margin, like this garment, this *tallit* [prayer shawl]. The *tzitzit*, the ritual fringes, are the parts that remind us to engage in *mitzvot* [commandments or good deeds]. We work to live at the edge, on the fringe of the community. We are not creating an inner-facing circle, but facing outward, like *tzitzit*. That way, we avoid a power and oppression dynamic. We have enough of a marginal, or outsider, perspective that we can call out injustice within our walls. The outer edge defines the center, not the reverse.

...How do we see ourselves and our behavior? What would we say about our behavior if we embraced being at the margin? What needs to change for each of us and for us together to help us decrease injustice in the coming year? How will we respond when we mess up? When others do?

-- full sermon on "Shalom Rav" blog, posted 2015. This is slightly edited from the original and shared with permission of the author.



Image: תהלת, CC0, via Wikimedia Commons. "Tzitzit with Tchelet [thread of blue]"

TORAH EXPLORATIONS: PRAYER and PRACTICE cont.

from "Shema: A Paraliturgical reflection by Rabbi Shoshana Meira Friedman"

God spoke to Moshe saying:

Put fringes on the corners of your garments for all generations.

Put in the fringes a thread of blue, the color of sky and of clarity.

The fringes shall be yours.

You shall see them and remember this direction.

You shall gather in the marginalized scraps of yourself

under the shawl of My love.

When you see the fringed edges you will be knotted back to your center

So you won't stray too long away your integrity, your good life.

When you follow this direction, you will merit to be holy in relationship to Me,

For I am the force that pulls you out of stuck places

to be in loving relationship with you.

This is the truth. -- Feb 19, 2021 CC BY-SA 4.0 copleft Rabbi S.M. Friedman

----- In Memory, For Healing, Celebration -----

Yahrzeit, July 10. Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz (1945-2018), Brooklyn-born poet and activist who helped organize Jews for Racial and Economic Justice (JFREJ) in New York City in the early 1990s.

Recent Losses. In addition to others killed by the state in recent months (see below): Duane Owen, executed in Florida, June 15.

Healing: all who seek healing of spirit; those needing medical attention and healing of body.

Celebration: for connection, overcoming obstacles, new learning.

Share your prayer concerns for the next *Divrei Matir Asurim*. in isolation. Ronnie, in need of joint healing and expedited medical care. All in need of healing. Share your prayer concerns for the next *Divrei Matir Asurim*.

OUTSIDE NEWS

Penpal Community Hour on Zoom. On Sunday, July 16th from 6-7pm EST, we will offer a monthly Penpal Community Hour on Zoom for those with incarcerated penpals.

Reimbursements: We are excited to share that we are able to reimburse Matir Asurim penpals for postage expenses spent on penpals. Details on MatirAsurim.org

Shutim ("Questions and Answers"): Shutim is a new column in Matir Asurim mailings that responds to questions that folks inside are asking about how to do Jewish practices while incarcerated. [Send](#) questions to: Matir Asurim, PO Box 18858, Philadelphia, PA 19119.

Seeking interviewees for Prison Chaplaincy Oral History Project!

Shir, one of our Matir Asurim organizers, is collecting stories from prison chaplains (paid or volunteer) across faith traditions. They are interested in learning how people came to prison chaplaincy, how they understand "spiritual resilience" in the context of prison chaplaincy, and how they see their role as prison chaplains fitting into wider conversations about abolition. Please share information with chaplains who might be interested, <https://tinyurl.com/ChaplainOral>

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.
- 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



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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 Tammuz and photos were provided by V. Spatz, an outside member of Matir Asurim. As this experiment continues, look for words from other members.... and please consider sharing your own.