



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--July/Aug 2023/Av 5783

This *Divrei Matir Asurim* is part of an on-going experiment aiming to share 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 (with some internet links for those who can access them).

This month, *Divrei Matir Asurim* is divided into two parts to facilitate sharing of portions of interest:

1) Meeting and Operations 2) Torah Explorations: new approaches this month; feedback encouraged.

Inside readers, please send responses to news shared here, additional thoughts on MA operations, or Torah Explorations: through outside MA pen pal, if you have one; through USPS mail directly to: Matir Asurim, PO Box 18858. Philadelphia, PA 19119; or by emailing matirasurimnetwork@gmail.com.

MEETING AND OPERATIONS

Recent General Meeting News

Matir Asurim held general meetings on June 28 and July 12. Content included regular functioning of MA, clarification of decision-making process, and a proposal for individual support which raises some questions about precedence and capacity.

Decision-making Revisited

Matir Asurim last updated its decision-making process in early 2022. Recently, MA began discussing possible changes. The June 28 meeting introduced the proposed changes, and the July 12 meeting focused substantial time on considering what these changes would mean in practice.

Language Change

One change involves language for decisions. The existing process allows for votes of "yes," "block," or "abstain." The proposed change is for slightly different responses: "in favor," "block," or "stand aside." The new language is common for consensus models of decision-making.

"Abstain," in the older language, is a non-vote. This is often used when someone is not prepared, for whatever reason, to decide; it is usually considered a neutral choice. On the other hand, the proposed expression, "stand aside," is a form of disagreement; it does not stop the proposal from going forward, but it is not neutral. "Block," which would remain unchanged, is a stronger response. This is used only when someone believes a proposal is a serious mistake and disagrees fundamentally with moving it forward. No one at the July 12 meeting spoke against the proposed change from "abstain" to "stand aside." Several spoke in favor. But there were worries expressed about the existing "block" language.

(cont. p.2)

MEETING AND OPERATIONS

(cont. from p.1) Consensus and Blocking

Decision-making based on voting is so common that many of us don't give it much thought. Whoever gets the most votes wins an election. If a proposal has more "yes" than "no" votes, it passes -- no matter how seriously or how loudly some people object. Sometimes rules require a minimum number or percentage of "yes" votes for approval. Many jury decisions must be unanimous. But these are all voting models.

Consensus is a different model, designed to take a step only when everyone in the group agrees it's the right move. One aspect of the consensus model is the ability of every person to block an action. This is meant to equalize power and prevent actions that might hurt some people from passing. Even if the block is rarely, if ever, used, the possibility means that no minority opinion can be ignored. But blocks, if used lightly or too often, can keep an organization from taking action.

There was a particular concern raised on July 12 about the possibility of a block from someone who is generally uninvolved in MA, or did not attend relevant meetings. Another member noted, however, that a block can cause objections to be heard and included in a new proposal. Or a blocked proposal might pass at a later date, when conditions change.

As things stand now, any member of "Core List" can block a proposal, in both proposed changes AND existing decision-making structure.

Quorum

MA has a "Core List," a Google Group for outside members who have attended at least two General Meetings. Current rules say that some decisions require two thirds (2/3) from that core list to respond. With 25 members in the Google Group, a quorum is now 17. Does this fraction still make sense?

General Meetings often have fewer than 17 people attending. This means that decisions must be approved by people who were not at meetings.

There was concern at the July 12 meeting that needing 17 "in favor," could require response from people not following and the topic and unprepared to respond. It also means waiting to hear from core list folks after a meeting is over -- which could be problematic in time sensitive matters.

Should the core list be reviewed to ensure that 25 people -- and this number is growing -- are, or still wish to be, active? Should there be a "pause" or "on leave" category? For example, if five of the 25 core list do not participate now, listing them "on leave" would change the quorum calculation; a proposal would require only 13 "in favor" to pass. Some members noted, however, that someone who doesn't participate might still have important perspectives that should be considered.

Precedent and Values

The current decision-making flow asks about "scale" of the question: Is it about "governance, vision, or leadership," does it concern a specific project, or is it a "purely administrative" matter? The last category would not require full consensus. But determining scale is not so simple, MA discovered in July 12 discussion. If chaplains propose an on-line MA forum, is this a purely administrative matter to be decided by that group? Or does it influence how MA, as a whole, is viewed by the outside world, affecting vision?

The concept of "precedent" often arises in what might look like "purely administrative" matters. For example, if MA is asked spend money for one need, what happens when a similar request comes? Does every decision create a precedent for the future? How is MA's overall vision influenced by month-to-month decisions?

Records

Another issue raised was about note-taking and archives. Does MA have "official" notes of meetings? How do we ensure that everybody involved in a decision is, actually, "in favor" (or not) of the same thing?

MEETING AND OPERATIONS

Working Group and Team News

Finance, Membership and Wellness

Finance Team is meeting in late July to discuss solidarity or mutual aid fund for inside members.

Membership is considering an on-line forum for chaplains. Comms Team discussed this briefly.

Groups centered in one geographic area are forming: Seattle area gathered in July, and San Francisco Bay area will meet soon.

Resources Team

Tisha B'av, the day of mourning, falls on July 26-27 this year. Resources should be arriving soon. The next mailing will be for the high holidays. Rosh Hashanah starts on the evening of Sep. 15. Submissions are due August 25. Submissions can be sent to: Matir Asurim, PO Box 18858. Philadelphia, PA 19119.

Individual Support

An inside MA member is up for parole soon and could use letters of support. Discussion at the June 28 General Meeting centered around what letters make a difference -- for example, letters from people in near where the individual plans to settle, and letters emphasizing that a Jewish community awaits their fuller participation upon release.

A draft joint letter was shared with the core list on Jul 2 for a two-week edit/comment period.

General Question

MA is regularly asked to provide support for individuals and causes related to prison justice:

- supporting an incarcerated individual's Jewish education;
- supporting an incarcerated individual's general education;
- supporting legal needs;
- joining a social media campaign for a cause related to prison justice.

Determining capacity and priorities is one part of MA's ongoing work. Another is evaluating what precedents are set in responding to any request.

Communications Team

After years of informal operation, this group held its first monthly meeting as a Team. The July meeting reviewed MA platforms: Instagram account, managed by one member; website, managed by two; and a monthly e-newsletter with one editor. The Team briefly discussed moderation needed for any on-line forum open to the public.

This experimental *Divrei Matir Asurim* is also related to Communications work.

Question raised: Which external events and campaigns should be part of MA communications? Policy proposal: Sharing only those news and action call items supporting incarcerated people, abolition, or prison justice. The possibility of a "partners" page on the website with related organizations was suggested.

Pen Pal Working Group

The group continues to train new penpals and help maintain matches. A monthly gathering of outside penpals offers two on-line spaces: one to write with support and one to converse with others.

Also in the works: organizing for hand-written holiday greetings, as one-time writing event.

Raised at a recent General Meeting: Could MA prepare supplementary messages or spiritual resources for penpals in solitary confinement?

MEETING AND OPERATIONS

Tablet Resources: Research Project -- RESPONSES STILL 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?

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

----- Memorial, Healing and Special Concern, Celebration -----

Yahrzeits: 8/7/2022. **Elana Dykewomon** (Nachman). Radical, Jewish lesbian author.

8/4/1962. **Marilyn Monroe** (Norma Jeane Mortenson). Jewish actor. Against career advice, stood with then-husband, Arthur Miller, during House Unamerican Activities Committee hearings (1956).

7/30/2022. **Nichelle** (Grace Dell) **Nichols**. Black actor, best known for role as Nyota Uhura in *Star Trek: The Original Series*. Recruiter for National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA).

8/17/1976. **Delmar G. Spatz**, father of MA member Virginia Spatz. Storyteller, asker of questions.

Recent Losses: July 2. **Dr. Susan Margaret Love**, surgeon and advocate for breast cancer research.

July 7. **Dr. Mutulu Shakur**. Black liberation activist and investigator of COINTELPRO. Step-father of Tupac. Freed in Nov. 2022, with advanced cancer, after serving 35 years of a 60-year sentence.

Healing and Special Concern: Those coping with extreme heat. All affected by wildfires and poor air quality. Scheduled executions: James Barber, 7/20 (AL). Jermaine Cannon, 7/20 (OK). James Phillip Barnes, 8/3 (FL). 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, celebrations, and memorials
for the next *Divrei Matir Asurim*.**

Submit through an outside pen pal, email ethreporter@gmail.com,
or mail to Matir Asurim, PO Box 18858. Philadelphia, PA 19119

TORAH EXPLORATIONS

From Counting to Recounting

So far, Torah Explorations reviewed the first five portions, and general themes, in the Book of Numbers, or *Bamidbar* [Wilderness]. We looked at how individuals and groups affect each other's identity. The remaining five portions* relate more group conflict and years of wilderness travel, ending with "Tribes [Matot]" and "Journeys [Masei]." The book closes, as it opens, with a census and a list of places.

Counting. "The text ends the chaos of the wilderness with the counting of the remaining Israelites," writes Dr. Erica Brown. Numbers/*Bamidbar* relies on "the security of numbers and dates" as bookends. But there are also hints "that life post-wilderness will never be the same." A whole generation is dead. The remaining people have faced decades of challenge, disaster, uncertainty...and grief.

Closing this book can remind us to pause, take stock, grieve. At the same time, we are approaching Tisha B'av, a date marking destruction and exile, the low point of the Jewish year. The Torah reading cycle and the Jewish calendar merge into a kind of reminder to reflect. A time to notice all that has gone sideways. In our lives. In the world around us. Before we climb up from this low point to face another year.

Brown shares teachings from the closing of the book of Numbers/*Bamidbar*:

Go and keep going. Part of the process of becoming a Jew was to take a journey....Discover yourself in the wilderness of a future you know not. -- *Leadership in the Wilderness*,** p. 240

These lessons can be of use as we begin the final book of the Torah and start preparing for the new year. There is more wilderness ahead. In the world around us. In our lives. And in the Torah story....

Recounting. The fifth book of the Torah doesn't really have an English name. It is called "Deuteronomy," from the Greek for "Second Law," because Moses is repeating instructions:

These are the words that Moses addressed to all Israel across the Jordan in the wilderness...Moses set about to explain this Instruction -- Deuteronomy 1:1-5

In Hebrew, the book is named "*Devarim*" -- "Words" or "Things/Matters," as in *Divrei Matir Asurim* (*divrei* = *devarim* + of). It is named for its second word: "These are the words [*Eleh ha-devarim*]..."

...There is no commonly accepted English translation for "*Devarim*" as a book.

So, let's stick with the Hebrew here, rather than the Greek-Latin loan word....

Devarim is Moses' words. He is recounting what happened earlier in Exodus and Numbers. He repeats what happened at Sinai and many stories of conflicts between the people, God, and him -- from his own perspectives. These are often angry and bitter. Some of his words reflect fear of others and show unwillingness to share food, land, and community. These passages can be very disturbing. And yet *Devarim* includes important ethical teachings and some of the most famous passages in Jewish liturgy.

Engaging this complicated text is a constant challenge. No one approach works for everyone. And an approach that seems useful one week might fail the next, as we, and our circumstances, change.

**Chukat* ["Statutes"], Num 19:1-22:1. *Balak* [a king's name], 22:2-25:9. *Pinchas* [a priest's name], 25:10-30:1. *Matot* ["Tribes"], 30:2-32:42. *Masei* ["Journeys"], 33:1-36:13. The final words (36:13) are:

...by the hand of Moses, to the children of Yisrael, on the steppes of Moab, at the Jordan near Jericho.

**Erica Brown. *Leadership in the Wilderness: Authority and Anarchy in the Book of Numbers*. Maggid Books, 2013

TORAH EXPLORATIONS: PRAYER and PRACTICE

Some prayer words from the Book of *Devarim* (Deuteronomy)

THE Prayer. When Moses makes a request here, he first praises God.

I pleaded [*va-etchanan*] with the LORD at that time, saying:

“O Lord GOD, You who let Your servant see the first works of Your greatness and Your mighty hand, You whose powerful deed no god in heaven or on earth can equal! Let me, I pray, cross over and see the good land on the other side of the Jordan, that good hill country and the Lebanon.” – *Devarim* 3:23-25

Praising first and then asking, is a model for Jewish prayer in general. For example, this is a major organizing principle of The Amidah (Standing) Prayer, sometimes called "The 18 Blessings," sometimes just: "THE Prayer." We start and end with blessings of gratitude, sandwiching requests into the center.

One line from the "Avot [Ancestors]" blessing in THE Prayer — "the great, the mighty, and the awesome God [*ha-el ha-gadol, ha-gibor v'ha-nora*]" -- comes from *Devarim* 10:17.

Shema. "The Shema" is an core part of Jewish worship. It is a recitation of Torah or a statement/focus of attention, rather than a request. But it is included in several daily prayers, with different blessings for morning, evening, and bedtime. The central declaration and first paragraph are found *Devarim* 6:4-9:

Shema -- Hear! or Listen!

Hear, O Israel! YHVH is our God, YHVH alone.

OR: Listen Israel, The LORD, our God, the LORD is one! -- *Devarim* 6:4

V'ahavta -- You shall love...

You shall love your God YHVH with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. Take to heart these instructions with which I charge you this day. Impress them upon your children. Recite them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up. Bind them as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead; inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. -- *Devarim* 6:5-9

In many prayerbooks, *Devarim* 11:13-21 is the second paragraph of the Shema recitation. The passage begins: "If you obey the commandments..." Rain and good fortune are promised for obedience; disaster, and God's anger, is threatened for disobedience. Some prayerbooks use a different passage or skip down:

...Therefore impress these My words upon your very heart: bind them as a sign... and inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. -- *Devarim* 11:18-20

After Meals. The Torah basis for the "*Birkat Hamazon* [blessing after meals]" is *Devarim* 8:10. This line is found amid recollections of how God cared for the People in the wilderness, through much difficulty, and promises regarding the Land, where they will “eat bread without scarceness.”

Og and Sihon. These two mighty, defeated, kings appear in *Devarim* 1:4 and in chapters 2-3. They also appear in Psalm 135:10-12 and Psalm 136:18-22. Psalm 136 is included in morning prayers for Shabbat and festivals in many, but not all, prayerbooks. In some, Psalm 136 is included in part, without the Og/Sihon verses and a few others. The Reform *Mishkan T'filah* and some others omit it entirely.

TORAH EXPLORATIONS: PROPHETS and the NEW YEAR'S CALL

The annual reading cycle links a passage from the Prophets with weekly Torah portions and holiday readings. For most of the year, the "*haftarah*" (sounds a bit like "half Torah," but the words are not related; plural: "*haftorot*") relate to a theme in the Torah portion. Ten weeks before the new year, *haftorot* have their own separate arc.

Three weeks leading up to Tisha B'av (7/26 this year), "afflict" us, criticizing our failings. After that, seven *haftorot* of comfort offer hope and remind us that change is possible. Together they suggest a journey toward change for the new year.

NOTE: Although traditions vary, these are common readings for seven *haftorot* of comfort.

| Portion Name | Torah verses. | Prophetic reading. | Shabbat date for 2023 reading |
|--|------------------------|---|-------------------------------|
| <i>Ve'etchanan</i> ("I pleaded"). | Devarim 3:23 - 7:11. | HAFTARAH: Isaiah 40:1-26. | Shabbat, July 29. |
| <i>Eikev</i> ("If you follow"). | Devarim 7:12 - 11:25. | HAFTARAH: Isaiah 49:14-51:3. | Shabbat, Aug 3. |
| <i>Re'eh</i> ("See"). | Devarim 11:26 - 16:7. | HAFTARAH: Isaiah 54:11-55:5. | Shabbat, Aug 12. |
| <i>Shoftim</i> ("Judges"). | Devarim 16:18 - 21:9. | HAFTARAH: Isaiah 51:12-52:12 | Shabbat, Aug 19. |
| <i>Ki Teitzei</i> ("When you go out"). | Devarim 21:10 - 25:19. | HAFTARAH: Isaiah 54:1-10 | Shabbat, Aug 26. |
| <i>Ki Tavo</i> ("When you come"). | Devarim 26:1-29:8. | HAFTARAH: Isaiah 60:1-22. | Shabbat, Sep 2. |
| <i>Nitzavim</i> ("Standing"). | Devarim 29:9-30:20. | Double portion with <i>Vayeilech</i> this year. | |
| <i>Vayeilech</i> ("He went"). | Devarim 31:1-30. | HAFTARAH: Isaiah 61:10-63:9. | Shabbat, Sep. 9. |

(1) Isaiah 40:4

Let every valley be raised,
Every hill and mount made low.*
Make the crooked** ground level
And the ridges become a plain.

*If a haughty person repents, if they're willing to be "low," God will raise that person back up. (B. Talmud Eruvin 54a)

**Conditions of "crooked ground," like exile, can be obstacles to observing Judaism. This might mean "extra credit" for extra effort. Others look forward to the day when living their faith will be easier for all. (based on *Kedushat Levi*, 18th Century Ukraine)

(5) Isaiah 54:9-10

For this to Me is like the waters of Noah:
As I swore that the waters of Noah
Nevermore would flood the earth....
For the mountains may move
And the hills be shaken,
But my loyalty shall never move from you,
Nor My covenant of friendship be shaken
— said GOD, who takes you back in love

COVENANT OF FRIENDSHIP

"The 7 Noahide Commands" (p.8) focus our attention on some very basic ideas about acting "human." They also remind us of how easily humans mess up. Still, we are also promised: "GOD takes you back in love."

Isaiah 54:1-10, with its "covenant of friendship," appears as a *haftarah* twice/year: Once, with the Noah story, early in the new year. It repeats, here, as the year is ending. Why the repetition? Do we need reminding? Does God?

(7) Isaiah 62:10

Pass through,*
pass through the gates!
Clear the road for the people;
Build up, build up the highway,
Remove the rocks!**
Raise a banner over the peoples!

*The word "pass through" -- "*ivru*" -- is related to the word for "Hebrews," the people who "crossed over." This brings us back to Brown's note: "Part of the process of becoming a Jew was to take a journey" (see p.5). Maybe part of the process of preparing to cross over into the new year is to take a journey toward becoming more thoroughly the Jews we want to be.

**The Aramaic translation says this is good news for those who "remove evil thoughts," which are "like a stone of stumbling."

"The 7 Noahide Commands with Some Sources"

Adapted by V. Spatz from a piece by Aharon Varady on The Open Siddur

Early Jewish sources speak of commandments, or *mitzvot*, for all of humanity, not just Jews. These *mitzvot* are related to the story of the Flood (Genesis 6-9), so they are often called "The (Seven) Noahide Commands." There are several different lists of commands in the ancient sources. One strong theme in all of them is protecting consent and avoiding violence. They warn us against the horrors people can do in our conquest of each other and the non-human world.

Studying these commands can remind us all of the need to address perversion of justice in society around us and to support those experiencing the harshest consequences.

Aharon Varady prepared "The 7 Noahide Commands" for The Open Siddur Project. He notes that there is a tradition of reading moral documents, including the Ten Commandments, after morning prayers. Aharon suggests a similar practice for these Noahide Commands.

The full document offers much more detail from ancient and some modern sources, in English and Hebrew. This summary includes some Hebrew expressions, with translations, but omits the original Hebrew sources and complete citations. It is reformatted for *Divrei Matir Asurim* with thanks to Aharon Varady and The Open Siddur Project.

While reading these commands, and their explanations, we can notice how society around us upholds them or fails to do so. We can look for opportunities to respond to violations of these commands... Some of us might notice opportunities we squander, failing to speak or act when we should. Some of us might need more positive ways to counteract violations, when we experience them ourselves.

Commands are bold. Explanations and introductions are regular type.

TO THE FIRST EARTHLING: One, or two, maybe three commands

Rabbi Yehudah bar Ilai says:

The first human, *Adam Ha-Rishon*, was given only one command, regarding "estranged devotion" or "strange worship" [*avodah zarah*] (Gen 2:16-17)

Rabbi Yehudah ben Betirah says:

Also concerning blessing "the Name" (God) [*birkat hashem*] (Gen 4:26)

And some say: also concerning courts/legal system [*ha-dinim*] (Gen 18:19-21)

-- Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 56b

Author information and citation, p.9

See also "Covenant of Friendship," p.7.

1. Avodah Zarah. Avoid estranged devotion (strange worship)

Don't idolize non-divine things. Don't deny interconnection in life. Do not despair by believing we're ultimately alone. Don't turn worship into self-congratulation or praise of conformity.

2. Birkat Hashem. Bless God's name.

Recognize the divine. Rabbi Abraham Twerski recommends prayer in 12-Step Programs, even for non-believers, as part of "the realization that we are not God" (from *Making Prayer Real*, p.121).

3. Ha-Dinim. Set up court/legal system.

God says (Gen 18:19) that Abraham and descendants must do what is "just and right." Jews and non-Jews today must address perversion of justice in the existing systems around us.

(cont. p.9)

TO NOAH AND DESCENDANTS: Seven commands, two versions

A) Also on Sanhedrin 56b, another set of commands begins with 1-3 above, adding four prohibitions:

4. incest, rape, corrupting intimate vows: *gilui arayot* [lit.: "forbidden sexual acts"] (Gen 6:2, 12)

Center consent in sexual relationships.
Regarding intimate relationships: Consider uneven power dynamics, in individual relationships and in the wider society.

5. bloodshed: *shfikhut damim* [lit.: "shedding blood"] (Gen 4:11, Gen 9:6)

Avoid inter-human violence, including neglect and dangerous situations in labor.

6. taking without consent: *gezel* ["stealing"] (Gen 2:16-17)

Don't cheat. Don't be dishonest. And don't take, or touch, things without consent.

7. devouring like a predator: *ever min hê-ḥai* [literally: "limb from a living creature"] (Gen 9:4)

Don't cause needless suffering in any creature.
Do not behave as a predator. Do not create conditions that make others desperate, more likely to prey on those more vulnerable, or more likely to become prey.

B) The school of Menasheh teaches a list without #2-3 above, adding, instead, the final two below:

1. estranged devotion: ***avodah zarah*** [literally: "foreign/strange worship"] (Gen 2:16-17)

2. incest, rape, corrupting intimate vows: ***gilui arayot*** [lit.: "forbidden sex acts"] (Gen 6:2, 12)

3. bloodshed: ***shfikhut damim*** [lit.: "shedding blood"] (Gen 4:11, Gen 9:6)

4. taking without consent: ***gezel*** ["stealing"] (Gen 2:16-17)

5. devouring like a predator: ***ever min hê-ḥai*** [literally: "limb from a living creature"] (Gen 9:4)

6. forced sterilization: *serus* [lit.: "castration/mutilation"] (Isaiah 56:3-5, Gen 9:24)

Prevent genocide and eugenics. Don't use castration to control labor or behavior.

7. unsafe conditions for captives: *kilayim* [lit.: "restraining, forbidden mixture"] (Isaiah 42:22)

Don't limit the movement of a captive, making them vulnerable to others in captivity. Don't force humans or non-humans together into dangerous situations for sport.

The biblical Flood story highlights how violent humans can be. These commands were developed, about 1500 years ago, from the biblical text to suggest how humans might do better. Readers today still use them to consider what it means to be a human among other creatures. We still struggle with what basics we can, and should, require of one another. And with how hard that "basic humanity" seems to be for us. ... See also "Covenant of Friendship," p.8.

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TORAH EXPLORATIONS: Returning from the Narrow Place

A *dvar Torah* by Rabbi Steven Jacobs

T'ruah (M)oral Torah Series, *Va'etchanan* 2022, adapted*

"Cities of Refuge" are first introduced at the end of *Bamidbar*, the Book of Numbers (Num 35:9-15). God commanded the Israelites to set aside six cities of refuge for individuals who commit murder accidentally — a place where they could live without fear of retribution. In *Va'etchanan*,** Moses, sets aside three of these cities on the east side of the Jordan River, outside the Land (Deut 4:41-43). These cities represent the triumph of hope over despair.

Moses has been told he will never enter the Land himself, that he will die in the wilderness. But he takes the opportunity to perform a mitzvah for a future he will never see realized.

In biblical times, cities of refuge offered hope, a place of protection in time of trouble. The carceral system in the US and Canada today provides, instead, narrow places to those who become ensnared in its pervasive net.

"A typical cell is a small cement and brick box—the size of a typical parking space," says a recent Vera Institute overview of US prison conditions. The International Red Cross calls for a minimum of 58 square feet for an individual cell, but some US facilities provide less. Millions live in these and other narrow spaces.***

We are taught that God is with us in the "narrowest" of places. Rabbi Nachman of Breslov (1772-1810) said "the whole world is a narrow bridge." A popular Jewish song repeats his teaching:

kol ha'olam kulo gesher tzar me'od
the world is a narrow bridge,
but the essence is not to be afraid.

Narrowness. Our relationship to the Divine can be found in the "*tzar*," narrowest of places, even a tiny jail cell or in the depths of our failed relations with our fellow humans. Hope can be found even in the most challenging moments. Refuge can be found in many forms.

As a rabbi, I have visited people who are incarcerated, including for violence and murder. Often, they have been jailed for 20 years or more. From their narrow places, many continue to work to repent and their rehabilitation and, upon release, do remarkable things in their communities. Their perseverance to repair the world every day enables them to be free at last.

Rav Zalmon Sarotzkin (Ukraine, 1881-1966), in his commentary on this portion, teaches that all of us are responsible for one another. We owe it to our *neshamah*/soul and fellow humans to share our Torah and open windows to help others access it. With this in mind, we honor Torah shared across prison walls. Those in every community who work to provide Torah and emotional support for incarcerated individuals and their families.

Nelson Mandela (1918-2013) taught us a great deal on the concepts of incarceration, refuge, and redemption. First, he taught us that to know a nation is to look inside its jails. Second, he taught us that courage is not the absence of fear but the triumph over it.

Rabbi Nachman taught that with *emunah*/faith, there is no despair in the world. In our tradition, from any place on earth, even the narrowest, there is always the possibility of *teshuvah* — a return. Like Moses, we each have an opportunity to help provide refuge for others. Actions we take today can provide refuge to the generations that will follow us.

Rabbi Steven Jacobs is a life-long social justice activist and lives in Northern California. He authored this piece with his chevruta, Dan Cohen, a social change communicator who lives in Ra'anana, Israel.

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*Adapted for *Divrei Matir Asurim*, by V. Spatz, 7/23

**Second portion of *Devarim* [Deuteronomy]
Va'etchanan ["and he pleaded"] - Deut 3:23-7:11.

***more details next page

Sources for "Returning from the Narrow Place" -- *Examining Prisons Today* report (2018) by Vera Institute. *Water, Sanitation, Hygiene, and Habitat in Prisons* (2012), International Committee of the Red Cross, 2012. Cell sizes vary in the US and Canada. Average US single-person cell size is often reported as 6' X 8' or 6' X 9' (48 - 54 sq. ft; Reference.com, Wikipedia). A Canadian Broadcasting report from 2014 lists single-occupancy average as 7 square meters (about 70 sq. ft).



T'ruah logo is a stylized ram's horn and organization's name

Rabbis for Human Rights-North America (RHR-NA) was founded in 2002 and became "T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights" in 2013. The name comes from one of the sounds of the shofar (ram's horn), which "calls us to take action to create a more just world and indicates our belief in the possibility of liberation....

...Today, we associate the shofar primarily with Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, when we sound it during synagogue services. The shofar wakes us up, demands that we examine our past behavior, and calls us to action." T'ruah, 266 W. 37th Street Suite 803 New York, NY 10018

T'ruah's "(M)oral Torah" is a series of essays on the Torah portions, "each exposing a different 'face' of how Torah demands that we create a more just world." In addition to these divrei Torah, T'ruah provides resources for rabbis and Jewish communities to address a number of pressing issues, including fighting mass incarceration and ending solitary confinement. Publications include *Handbook for Jewish Communities Fighting Mass Incarceration* and *Shadow Report to UN: Solitary Confinement and U.S. Compliance with Convention Against Torture* (2014).

OUTSIDE NEWS

Membership/Wellness Meeting July 25, 7 p.m. Eastern, via Zoom to discuss establishing a solidarity fund or mutual aid fund for inside members.

Communications Team Meeting August 11 at 1 p.m. Eastern via Zoom.

Penpal Team Meeting August 6th from 7-8 pm Eastern.

Reimbursements: Funds are available to reimburse outside penpals for email or USPS expenses. Details on MatirAsurim.org

Shutim ("Questions and Answers"): The Shutim column in Matir Asurim mailings 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.](#)

High Holiday Resource Submissions: Due August 25. Link on website. Tisha B'av resources are ready and should soon.

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>

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. *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>.

Contact Matir Asurim. PO Box 18858, Philadelphia, PA 19119. 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.

If not otherwise noted, words of Torah for Av 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.