



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--Aug/Sep 2023/Elul 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 three parts to facilitate sharing of portions of interest: 1) Meeting and Operations, 3) Topic Digest: Solitary Confinement, and 3) Torah Explorations. Continuing to experiment; 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](mailto:matirasurimnetwork@gmail.com).

### *MEETING AND OPERATIONS*

#### **Recent General Meeting News**

There was no general meeting on July 26, due to observance of Tisha B'av. The general meeting on August 9 discussed these topics:

- planning for "MA 201: Understanding MA functioning and challenges" session;
- possible involvement in advocacy work, such as supporting legislation;
- development of a financial support fund, separate from operations budget.

#### **Decision-making Revisited**

As previously reported, MA last updated its decision-making process in early 2022. Proposed changes were discussed in June and July meetings, with summaries shared in the last (Av, July/August) report. The August 9 meeting included review of an inside member's responses on those issues. In addition, responses were shared by email with others on the "Core List," Google Group for MA organizers. Due to time constraints, further discussion of decision-making was postponed for another meeting.

#### **MA 201 Workshop**

A small team proposes "MA 201 workshop or class." This 90-minute session would be offered during a regular General Meeting time slot and recorded for those unable to attend. Planned is a series of short presentations plus questions. The session would start with a history and membership review: MA's origin, growth, and future. Next segments: finances and fund-raising, facilitation of

meetings, storage of notes, and decision-making process. Finally, experiments currently underway: chaplain's network, regional hubs, and inside-outside communications. In addition to describing how MA works now, the session will flag points where we're still unclear or challenges arise. Proposed dates are at the end of September, or at the November 8 meeting.

## MEETING AND OPERATIONS: General Meetings

### Involvement in Advocacy

**General issue:** What does MA think about getting involved in advocacy work, such as supporting legislative changes or other systemic efforts? How much, and what kinds of, capacity is required for this? What form would such efforts take within MA membership and wider networks?

**Specific issue:** The National Religious Coalition Against Torture (NRCAT) is part of a long-standing effort to end Solitary Confinement. New legislation, introduced into the U.S. House of Representatives on July 27, would ban Solitary Confinement in all federal facilities. NRCAT organized a press conference in support of this legislation and called on other religious groups to join their endorsement.

MA missed the opportunity to be part of that first press conference, but there will be other chances. The coalition is still looking for religious groups to sign on. In addition, they say any statement provided could be used in future press opportunities.

**Current Concern:** Legally, lobbying and other kinds of political action can affect a group's non-profit standing. Social Good Fund, the umbrella group -- a 501(c)3 non-profit -- which handles MA finances, should be informed of any political action taken.

**Future Concerns:** What kind of process will MA use for future decisions about whether to sign on to this or that campaign, as that arises in the future? How will MA determine which organizations we should lend our name?

**Future Opportunity:** Not everyone interested in MA's work is involved directly in the carceral system or in relationship with incarcerated individuals. Some might want to work on

advocacy issues instead. Providing more variety in how folks can plus in could be beneficial to all.

**Draft Statement:** "Matir Asurim: Jewish Care Network for Incarcerated People regularly encounters the physical, psychological, and spiritual devastation of solitary confinement. Our name, "Matir Asurim (literally: The One Who Frees Captives)," reflects Jewish values -- including human dignity, healing, and *teshuvah* (repentance/restoration) -- in opposition to solitary confinement. We applaud introduction of the End Solitary Confinement Act (HR 4972) in the US Congress, thank its co-sponsors, and encourage others to support this legislation and, more generally, an end to this form of torture wherever it is employed.

"For those in the US: Use this form to encourage your Representative to co-sponsor this bill or thank them for already doing so. If your congregation or other organization would like to endorse HR 4972, use this form."

**Suggested Addition to Draft:** "We implore other Jewish institutions and organizations to get behind the work of ending solitary and advocating for prison justice more broadly."

**Decision (unanimous among those present):** Someone will inform Social Good Fund that MA wants to sign onto this End Solitary Campaign. They will find out, at the same time, if MA needs prior permission from Social Good for any future action.

Once Social Good has been informed, an MA representative will sign the NRCAT endorsement form and submit our statement. Next steps, if this is approved, will be to share the action more widely.

### Individual Financial Support Fund

MA is considering a separate fund to support MA insider members who are incarcerated or returning to outside life. This is just an idea now, still in the discussion stage.

## *MEETING AND OPERATIONS: General Meetings*

### **(General Meeting: Individual Financial Support Fund, cont. from p.2)**

**Jewish Needs?** Should funds be for "Jewish" needs, like kosher food or Jewish education? Or, maybe Jewish education and ritual support should be part of MA's operational funds, while the separate fund would be for other needs.

One proposal was to figure a set sum available to MA members inside. Example: enough for kosher snacks, one ritual item, and three Jewish books.

**Legal Funds:** An inside member raised the specific need for legal aid funds. Outside members proposed looking into other, existing sources of funding for legal assistance. We also considered the possibility of crowd-funding organized by outside MA folks for an individual member's legal (or other) needs.

**Raising and Distributing Funds:** More generally, there are many questions about how funds would be distributed. Should MA try to support one or a few individuals more thoroughly? Or would it be better to offer smaller sums to a larger group of individuals? Should MA raise money and then announce how much is available? Or should MA

try to determine how much should be offered to each person and then fundraise for that total amount?

**Accountability and Relationship:** Would there be a requirement to explain a need and then prove how funds were spent? How would such a process be handled by our group of volunteers? Would it be more in the spirit of building relationships, as well as principles of Jewish giving, to offer without questions? Would money be available only to people who already had a relationship with MA for a period of time, six months or a year?

**More Information Needed:** Individuals working on this project are contacting other organizations who have some experience in this field. We are also looking for people with expertise in legal and financial areas involving incarcerated people. There are also bureaucratic issues around how to get money inside.

**Next Steps:** More discussion is planned before offering a specific proposal. Feedback welcome.

## **Working Group and Team News**

### **Pen Pal Working Group**

The group continues to train new penpals and help maintain matches. In addition, two outside groups are working on one-time high holiday writing: One in California, maybe during a Penpal community meeting. Another possibility is for MA to share information and tips for getting mail inside; maybe getting their penpals to join our list.

There was a suggestion last month to consider supplementary messages or spiritual resources for penpals in solitary confinement. One inside member recently shared an endorsement of this work, noting how hard it is to get through time in solitary and how important it is to know that you're not forgotten.

### **Resources Team**

Tisha B'av resources were sent in late July and are now on the Matir Asurim website for download and sharing.

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.

**Rosh Hashanah starts Sep. 15 eve.  
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*MEETING AND OPERATIONS: Working Groups*

**Communications Team**

August meeting focused on splitting up the work. Two new members will co-edit monthly e-news. Those already working on *Divrei Matir Asurim*, Facebook and Instagram will continue for now.

An inside member wrote in favor of the "partner page," previously proposed, saying it would help build MA's network and reach. Team is still working on process for choosing partners and, perhaps, a "resource" listings.

**Finance, Membership and Wellness**

Matir Asurim is eager for to build our capacity, join us in the new year to grow our community.

The MA Fundraising team is in the beginning stages of organizing a mutual aid fund to directly benefit our inside members.

The Membership & Wellness team is organizing local hubs, doing outreach to reach more incarcerated community, and building relationships to strengthen our organization.

**Tablet Resources: Research Project -- RESPONSES STILL NEEDED**

Thanks to those who responded. Still seeking information about from inside members:

- Which Jewish apps and other materials on the tablet are most useful?
- Are Jewish resources are hard to find, in general
- Are any apps recommended by teachers, friends, or family are unavailable?
- Do Jewish materials on the tablet meet your needs? and
- What is not available that you imagine would be supportive of your Jewish life?

Contact: [matirasurimnetwork@gmail.com](mailto:matirasurimnetwork@gmail.com). Matir Asurim, PO Box 18858. Philadelphia, PA 19119.

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

**Yahrzeits:** 8/28/20. **Chadwick Boseman**. Actor known for "Black Panther," important historical roles.  
8/29/2021. **Ed Asner**. Actor, union leader, supporter of people on death row.  
9/5/2015. **India Kager**, Navy Veteran, mother. Killed by police in Virginia Beach, VA.  
9/13/1996. **Tupac Shakur**. Poet, rapper, actor.

**Recent Losses:** July 21. **James Barber**, executed by state of Alabama.  
August 1. **Johnny A. Johnson**, executed by state of Missouri.  
August 3. **Alphonso Cave**, died on Florida death row.  
August 3. **James Phillip Barnes**, executed by state of Florida.

**Healing and Special Concern:** Those coping with extreme heat. All affected by wildfires, poor air quality. All who seek healing of spirit; those needing medical attention and healing of body.

**Celebration:** Matir Asurim members completing educational programs and internships.

**Share your prayer concerns, celebrations, and memorials for future editions.**

Submit through an outside penpal, email [ethreporter@gmail.com](mailto:ethreporter@gmail.com),  
or mail to Matir Asurim, PO Box 18858. Philadelphia, PA 19119

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## TOPIC DIGEST: Solitary Confinement

Carceral facilities across the US and Canada isolate some inmates in small spaces for up to 23 hours/day, sometimes for extended periods without program access, stimulation, or meaningful human contact. This has cognitive, psychological, and physical effects -- what the United Nations calls torture. Here is some basic background, as well as information about the #EndSolitary campaign Matir Asurim has joined.

The US has about 339 million residents. Every year, roughly 7 million are admitted to jail/prison, with a steady 1.9 million in incarceration. On any given day in the US, 122,000 adults and juveniles are held in solitary confinement.

Canada has about 39 million residents. More than 200,000 adults are admitted to custody in a year, with a population of about 33,000 incarcerated adults. (Thousands of juveniles move through the

court system each year, but less than 800 are in custody.) Solitary confinement in Canada was officially replaced with "Structured Intervention Units (SIUs)," as of November 2019. Experts say that, in practice, SIU conditions differ little from the now outlawed "solitary confinement."

Advocates trying to end the practice of isolation, by whatever name, use a variety of approaches.

### United States

One strategy is federal legislation. On July 27, a bill was introduced in House of Representatives "To end the use of solitary confinement and other forms of restrictive housing in all Federal agencies and entities they contract with." H.R. 4972 was referred to the House Judiciary Committee. It has 16 co-sponsors and additional supporters. But there is still a long road to passage in both House and Senate, followed by implementation.

Various states have also pursued legislative and court actions. In 2021, New York passed Humane

Alternatives to Long-term Solitary Confinement (HALT) Act. A year after implementation of the HALT Act, individuals were still being isolated, against the law. The New York Civil Liberties Union filed a class-action suit earlier this year, in an effort to force compliance with the law.

In Massachusetts, the 2018 Criminal Justice Reform Act attempted to reform, not abolish, solitary confinement. A 2022 class action suit argues that the reforms were not implemented. Similar patterns have unfolded in other states.

### Canada

For at least ten years, solitary confinement has been challenged in Canada through a variety of channels. In 2013, a human rights tribunal ordered change, with limited success. A series of class action suits resulted in damages awarded, appealed, and finally distributed. Suits are ongoing in Manitoba and other provinces.

In 2019, Parliament passed Bill C-83, "*Act to amend the Corrections and Conditional Release Act*," outlawing solitary confinement (both administrative and disciplinary). Shortly after the bill was enacted, a coalition of Canadian prison justice groups also organized "By any other name:

A 15 Day Spotlight on Solitary Confinement." This series of daily actions aimed to show that SIUs do not offer "meaningful change from the solitary confinement units they were meant to replace." An independent report, "Solitary Confinement, Torture, and Canada's Structured Intervention Units," found lack of change.

More recently, in June, McGill Law Journal's "[Counterpoint] Solitary Confinement in Canada," cited examples of progress in policy and practice. However, "Counterpoint" tressed that solitary confinement persists, regardless of name, and will only stop with serious, systemic change.

## TOPIC DIGEST: Solitary Confinement

(cont. from p.5)

### Responses and Resources

- "Solitary Confinement in the USA," Amnesty International, 2013.
- *Calculating Torture*, Unlock the Box and Solitary Watch, May 2023  
Solitary Watch at P.O. Box 11374, Washington, DC 20008
- Report to the UN on torture in the US, T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights, 2014  
also see *Av Divrei Matir Asurim* for more on T'ruah and prison justice  
T'ruah, 266 W. 37th Street Suite 803 New York, NY 10018
- to the Senate Committee on Human Rights, 2017  
John Howard Society, 809 Blackburn Mews, Kingston, ON K7P 2N6
- Solitary Confinement, Torture, and Canada's Structured Intervention Units, Sprott & Dobb, 2021  
also available through John Howard Society
- National Religious Campaign Against Torture (NRCAT), PO Box 91820, Washington, DC 20090

### #EndSolitary Campaign (US)

**Matir Asurim is joining** with NRCAT, T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights, and others to support HR 4972, the End Solitary Confinement Act. See "Draft Statement," above, p.2

**MA encourages those in the US** to ask their own Congressional Representative to co-sponsor the bill, and then ask others to do the same. Here is a sample letter, from NRCAT:

As a person of faith and your constituent, I urge you to cosponsor the End Solitary Confinement Act to end the torture of solitary confinement in federal facilities including federal prisons and immigration detention centers. This historic bill would establish limits on solitary confinement measured up to at most four hours for emergency de-escalation, require people in alternative forms of separation to have access to full days of out-of-cell time and group engagement, guarantee due process rights for individuals facing these alternative forms of separation, and establish robust oversight.

Prolonged solitary confinement is torture and violates the God-given inherent dignity of all people. To improve community safety and rehabilitation, I urge you to support this bill.

Feel free to edit the letter, especially if you have personal experience to share.

If your Rep. is one of those listed below, already co-sponsoring, thank them for their early support!

#### Current co-sponsors, as of 8/16:

Bowman (D-NY16), 7/27; Espaillat (D-NY-13), 7/27; Tlaib (D-MI-12), 7/27;  
Watson Coleman (D-NJ-12), 7/27; Kamlager-Dover (D-CA-37), 7/27; Norton (DC), 7/27;  
Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY-14), 7/27; Ramirez (D-IL-3), 7/27; Barragan, (D-CA-44), 7/27;  
Cleaver (D-MO-5), 7/27; Velazquez (D-NY-7), 7/27; Pressley (D-MA-7), 7/27; Lee (D-PA-12), 7/27;  
Meng (D-NY-6), 8/4; McGarvey (D-KY-3), 8/4; Frost (D-FL-10), 8/4.

**More information and action ideas will follow.**

## TORAH EXPLORATIONS: *Deuteronomy*

### "Grow, this Elul, Grow!"

Rabbi Matthew Soffer

based on Torah Portion "*Shoftim* [Judges]," Deuteronomy 16:18-21:9

Adapted, with kind permission of the author, from "Grow, Grow!" posted on My Jewish Learning.

In this season leading up to the High Holy Days, we might translate "*mitzvot* (commandments; plural of *mitzvah*)" to mean "our obligations to humanity and God." In that sense, the *mitzvot* challenge us to pay attention to the ultimate encounter with life itself. Every human being is a powerful variable, shifting constantly between forces of destruction and creation.

There's a beautiful teaching that says there are five most important *mitzvot* in the entire Jewish tradition, and the first is actually from this week's portion:

*Tamim tihyeh.* Be wholehearted with God. (Deuteronomy 18:13)

*Shiviti Adonai.* Always place God before you. (Psalms 16:8)

*V'ahavta l'reiecha kamocha.* Love your neighbor as yourself. (Leviticus 19:18)

*B'chol drachecha da'eihu.* Wherever you go recognize God. (Proverbs 3:6)

*Hatzneia lechet im Elohecha.* Walk humbly with God. (Micah 6:8)

Together these five teachings constitute a pattern, in the form of an acrostic. The first letter of each of those teachings spell the Hebrew word, *teshuvah*, return or repentance. (In Hebrew: *vav* can make either "v" or "u" sounds, as in *V'ahavta* or *shUvah*. *Bet* can sound as "b" or "v" -- as in *B'chol* or *shuVah*.)

This week we begin the month of Elul. This is a month we practice *teshuvah*, behaviors urging us to return to our holiest selves.

Another verse in this week's Torah portion calls out: "The human being is the tree of the field!" (Deut 20:19). In the spirit of Elul, we ask: Are we helping or hurting? Are we using words lovingly or harshly? Are we helping ourselves grow or cutting ourselves down?

An old, rabbinic story teaches that every blade of grass has its own angel, nudging it from heaven and whispering to it, "Grow, grow" (Genesis Rabbah 10:6, Talmudic-era commentary). Welcome to the month of Elul: A season in which we, like blades of grass — like the tree of the field — return again, moving toward creation, as our tradition whispers to us: Grow.

*Matthew V. Soffer is Senior Rabbi of Judea Reform Congregation in Durham, NC. He writes on climate and social justice and was chosen as one of "50 Faces of Justice" by Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism. His work includes music composition and performance, comedy, and community organizing.*

**Language Note: "tamim" with God?** In Deut 8:13, above, "wholehearted" is the Hebrew word "*tamim*." It's root, *Tav-Mem-Mem*, is usually translated as "to be whole, finished, perfect." The noun is "simplicity" or "integrity." What does it mean to be "*tamim*" with God? Considering bible verses where a word is used is one way to explore: Noah was *tamim* in his generation (Gen 6:9). God tells Abraham: "Walk before Me and be *tamim*" (Gen 17:1). God's ways are *tamim* (Ps. 18:31). *Tamim* ways are worthy of study (Ps. 101:2) and make people happy (Ps. 119:1). Being *tamim* allows a person to dwell on God's mountain (Ps. 15:2). Near the end of the Torah (Deut. 32:4), Moses declares God "The Rock! *Tamim!*"

## **TORAH EXPLORATIONS: Deuteronomy**

### **Further reflection on being "*Tamim with God*"**

*Pirkei Avot* (literally: verses or chapters of the parents), often called "Ethics of the Fathers," is an old section of Jewish rabbinic teaching. Scholars say it was composed around 190 - 230 CE (Common Era). It does not focus on laws but on ways of being. Many of its verses can be understood as reflections of early rabbinic Judaism on what it means to be human, how to be a good one, and what is required to create conditions where all can be "***Tamim with God***," and fulfill the other commandments discussed in "Grow, this Elul, Grow!"

Below are some of the teachings of *Pirkei Avot*, using the "Open Mishnah" translation, found on the learning site called Sefaria. These teachings are made available to us to share as long as we attribute the translation to its source and share for others to do the same.

These particular verses were selected by Matir Asurim member Virginia Avniel Spatz for study and reflection in the month of Elul. They were chosen in reflecting on the teaching, "Grow, this Elul, Grow!" kindly shared above by Rabbi Soffer, with three thoughts in mind:

- 1) How can we be more "*Tamim with God*"?
- 2) In what ways might incarceration and, particularly, solitary confinement, hinder being "*Tamim with God*"?
- 3) How can, and should, Jews work to build a world where more people are more able to pursue becoming more "*Tamim with God*"?

### **Selections from *Pirkei Avot*, Open Mishnah translation**

[with a few changes for this publication, in the interest of clarity:

Yehoshua ben Perachia says, "Make for yourself a mentor, acquire for yourself a friend and judge every person as meritorious." -- 1:6

Shemayah says, "Love work, hate [superiority, authority], and do not become familiar with the government." -- 1:10

Hillel would say, "If I am not for me, who will be for me? And when I am for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?" -- 1:14

Shammai says, "Make your Torah study fixed, say little and do much, and receive every person with a pleasant countenance." -- 1:15

Rabban Gamliel says, "Make for yourself a mentor, remove yourself from doubt and do not frequently tithe by estimation." -- 1:16

"Acquire for yourself a friend. A teacher for wisdom and a friend to study with."

-- a different version found in Avot D'Rabbi Natan, a companion text for Pirkei Avot, written hundreds of years later.



***TORAH EXPLORATIONS: Deuteronomy***  
**Selections from *Pirkei Avot*, Open Mishnah translation, cont.**

Rabban Gamliel the son of Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi said: Excellent is the study of the Torah together with a worldly occupation; for the effort in both of them causes sin to be forgotten. And all study of Torah in the absence of a worldly occupation comes to nothing in the end and leads to sin. -- 2:2

Hillel says: Do not separate yourself from the community. Do not believe in yourself until the day of your death. Do not judge your fellow until you come to his place. Do not say something that cannot be heard, for in the end it will be heard. Do not say, "When I will be available I will study [Torah]," lest you never become available. -- 2:4

Rabbi Tarfon said: It is not your responsibility to finish the work, but neither are you free to desist from it. -- 2:16

Rabbi Hanina the son of Hachinai says: He who stays awake at night, and wanders on a solitary road, and empties his heart for folly, is deemed by Scripture to be as if he was ["guilty of his life" NOTE from V.S: some ancient rabbis believed there were demons on lonely roads and that it was foolhardy to be, or leave someone, alone, without protection, at night] -- 3:4

Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah says: If there is no Torah, there is no worldly occupation, if there is no worldly occupation, there is no Torah. If there is no wisdom, there is no fear of God; if there is no fear of God, there is no wisdom. If there is no knowledge, there is no understanding; if there is no understanding, there is no knowledge.

If there is no flour, there is no Torah; if there is no Torah, there is no flour. He used to say: Anyone whose wisdom exceeds his deeds, to what is he compared? To a tree whose branches are many but whose roots are few; then the wind comes and uproots it and turns it upside down; as it is said; "And he shall be like a lonely juniper tree in the wasteland and shall not see when good comes, but shall inhabit the parched places of the wilderness, a salt filled land which is uninhabitable." (Jeremiah 17:6).

But one whose deeds exceed one's wisdom, what is that person like? Like a tree whose branches are few, but whose roots are many; even if all the winds of the world were to come and blow upon it, they would not move it from its place, as it is said; "He shall be like a tree planted by the waters, which spreads out its roots by the river, and shall not perceive when heat comes, but its leaf shall remain fresh; and it will not be troubled in the year of drought, nor will it cease to bear fruit." (Jeremiah 17:8). -- 3:17

Rabbi Nehorai says: Exile yourself to a place of Torah, and don't say that the Torah will follow you, because it's your colleagues who will make it yours. Don't rely on your lone understanding. -- 4:14

Rabbi Mattia son of Heresh said: Be the first to greet every person. -- 4:15

## TORAH EXPLORATIONS: Deuteronomy

### Moses, Rocks and Water

Rocks and water are important elements in the life of Moses:

- As an infant, he is rescued from the Nile River and named for that experience (Exodus 2:1-10);
- He meets his wife, Tziporah, at a well (Exodus 2:15-21);
- Twice in the Wilderness, he causes water to flow from a rock (Exodus 17, Numbers 20,\*\* p.11), and this ends up being a defining point in his life;
- In Deuteronomy, he speaks several times of rocks and water;
- As his death approaches, Moses refers to God as "The Rock" (Deuteronomy 32:4, 18).

In Deuteronomy, Moses is retelling the Wilderness story and providing final thoughts and commands, as he prepares to die. God already declared that Moses will die before entering the Promised Land. Sometimes, Moses blames the people for his fate: "I pleaded with YHVH...but YHVH was irate with me on your account and would not listen to me" (Deut 3:26). Sometimes Moses seems worried that the people will get into trouble, by repeating old mistakes or through forgetting their origin:

"Do not try YHVH, your God, as you did at Massah" (Deut 6:16);

"Take care lest you forget YHVH...who led you through the great and terrible wilderness with its *seraph* serpents and scorpions, a parched land with no water in it, who brought forth water for you from the flinty rock; who fed you in the wilderness with manna...and you say to yourselves: 'My own power and the might of my own hand have won this wealth for me.'" (Deut 8:11-17)

Finally, Moses declares:

"The Rock! — perfect [*tamim*] in deeds, Yea, all God's ways are just;  
A faithful God, never false,  
True and upright indeed

...You neglected the Rock that birthed you, you forgot God who brought you forth" (Deut 32:4, 18)

Some of these images are pretty strange. The oddness helps remind us that there are many ways to interpret what is happening and to explore meaning for ourselves. Earlier in life, Moses does not use rock images for God. Why is Moses thinking and talking about "the Rock" now, at the end of his journey? Are there any messages for us, as we move into the season of return and transformation?

Check out the Water-from-Rock stories, below (p.11), as they appear in the Torah. Also see "Speak Kindly to the Rock," from David Hanig (p.12).

As the Book of Deuteronomy closes, Moses dies and the people prepare to move on, across a different river than the one he knew as a child.

...But the Torah reading cycle never brings us across that river. Instead, we return with the new year to Eden...and then through all kinds of wandering...back into enslavement in Mitzrayim, where Moses again leads the way...The water and the rocks won't be the exactly same, next time we encounter them in the Torah cycle, because we'll be different. Something we learn each time around adds to the journey the next time.

May we all find a bit more *tamim*....a little more wholeness, completeness, perfection...in the new year!

*TORAH EXPLORATIONS: Deuteronomy*

\*\*In Exodus 17, the people are in the Wilderness, not long after departing from *Mitzrayim* and crossing of the Sea of Reeds. Suddenly: "There is no water for the people to drink" (Exodus 17:1). They complain to Moses. Moses complains to God -- called here by the four-letter name, YHVH:

Then YHVH said to Moses, "Pass before the people; take with you some of the elders of Israel, and take along the rod with which you struck the Nile, and set out. I will be standing there before you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock and water will issue from it, and the people will drink." And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel.

The place was named Massah [trial] and Meribah [quarrel], because the Israelites quarreled and because they tried YHVH, saying, "Is YHVH present among us or not?" (Exodus 17:5-6)

\*\*In Numbers 20, the people are in the Wilderness, nearly 40 years later, again without water. Again, they complain to Moses. This time YHVH appears to both brothers, Moses and Aaron, saying:

"You and your brother Aaron take the rod and assemble the community, and before their very eyes order the rock to yield its water. Thus you shall produce water for them from the rock and provide drink for the congregation and their beasts."

Moses took the rod from before YHVH, as commanded. Moses and Aaron assembled the congregation in front of the rock; and Moses said to them, "Listen, you rebels, shall we get water for you out of this rock?" And Moses raised his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod. Out came copious water, and the community and their beasts drank.

But YHVH said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not trust Me enough to affirm My sanctity in the sight of the Israelite people, therefore you shall not lead this congregation into the land that I have given them."

Those are the Waters of Meribah—meaning that the Israelites quarreled with YHVH—and God was made holy through them. (Numbers 20:8-12)

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## 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.

Contact Matir Asurim. PO Box 18858, Philadelphia, PA 19119. [matirasurimnetwork@gmail.com](mailto:matirasurimnetwork@gmail.com)

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*TORAH EXPLORATIONS: Deuteronomy*

**Speak Kindly to the Rock Within**

David Hanig

*And Moses raised his hand, and struck the rock with his rod twice -- Numbers 20:11*

We will not enter our promised land  
If we strike the rock within.

If we speak harshly to the rock within,  
We abandon ourselves to wandering  
Endlessly in a wilderness bereft of life,  
Until we surrender  
The doubting, faithless parts of ourselves  
And they turn to dust.

Only then, when those parts have died,  
And we learn to speak kindly to the rock within,  
Only then, will our water flow  
And we will enter that promised land  
At last.

David Hanig is a poet and author of *In Every Breath a Prayer: A Journey of Healing in Verse and Prose*.  
"Speaking Kindly to the Rock Within" is found on [RitualWell.org](http://RitualWell.org)



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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.

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

If not otherwise noted, content is 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.