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[Matir Asurim Logo: Abstract Torah scroll opened to read "Matir Asurim" plus Hebrew characters for the same and then: "Jewish Care Network for Incarcerated People."]

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

Divrei Matir Asurim

Matir Asurim Words/Matters--Sep 2023/Tishrei 5784

As we enter the new year, 5784, *Divrei Matir Asurim* continues as an experiment in sharing news with inside members and share inside members' thoughts with outside members. *Divrei MA* 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 MA* includes two sections: 1) Meeting and Operations and 2) Torah Explorations. 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

There was no general meeting on September 13, due to many absences for holiday preparation and travel. The general meeting on August 23 discussed these topics:

- communications around the fall holidays;
- development of a new process for General Meeting notes;
- more on advocacy work, especially End Solitary Confinement Act (US legislation).

September 27 General meeting also cancelled for holiday-related reasons. Next Meeting: October 11.

Communications and the Fall Holidays

We discussed the schedule for Tishrei electronic newsletter and *Divrei MA*. The usual practice of sending e-news on Rosh Chodesh, the first or second day of the new month, was not possible for Rosh Hashanah. So options were A) before Rosh Hashanah, B) during the Days of Awe, but not on a festival date; or C) skipping a month. No firm decision was made, and Communications Team also discussed. The result is an e-news, both shorter and later than usual, focused on the new year, and this later-than-usual *Divrei MA*.

We discussed the idea of sharing a set of "commitments for 5784" as a holiday greeting. Matir Asurim files include a document, "9 Solidarity Commitments to/with Incarcerated People for 2021." This list was created by author/activist Mariame Kaba "for people who want to be part of supporting and working alongside incarcerated people this year and need some concrete ideas/steps." The "9 Commitments" has been widely shared around the secular new year. It was last updated in June of 2022, and there have been many developments and new publications since that time. The suggestion was for Matir Asurim to create a similar list, updated and including Jewish readings and values. This project is now in the works but not yet ready for sharing.

New Meeting Notes Process

An outside member proposed a new process for meeting notes. The idea is to create a more consistent and systematized report, so that everyone is clear

- topics of "Exploration," discussion without any plan to decide or act (yet);
- what was agreed, if a decision was made;
- next steps to be taken; and
- what topics were not yet addressed -- in the "Parking Lot" for later

REPORT: This proposal included a report on a brief study of how non-profit boards suggest creating official "minutes" for a meeting. Most of those seemed a mismatch to MA's general operating procedures -- current or proposed. An organization called Sociocracy for All (SOFA) offered suggestions that seemed more aligned with MA. Below is their section on minutes, "Agenda, Minutes, Backlog."

DISCUSSION: We discussed the extra work involved to write, share, and approve notes. We also discussed time saved by having clear notes with next steps. In addition, we talked about the importance of consent and transparency. Everyone involved should know what is agreed or discussed. All should have an opportunity to say "no, that isn't what I agreed or not what I heard," before the notes are considered "official." In addition, approving notes after a meeting allows for adding information or clarifying and correcting before a record is finalized.

We had questions about whether approval was a waste of time. We considered that SOFA believes the step of asking for consent on what was agreed helps process in general. We were also not sure how to make sure that all concerned, especially inside members or others who cannot attend directly, are included in confirming notes.

PROPOSAL: In addition to notes taken during Matir Asurim General Meeting, a volunteer -- the same notetaker or an additional volunteer -- will create a summary of meeting content listing the following: Reports (beyond Team Updates), Explorations, Decisions, and Backlog. Decisions will include steps to be taken as a result and/or timeline for adopting decision, assuming there is no block. That summary will be approved at the next meeting.

FOLLOW-UP: After the August 23 meeting, the note-taker created an example of this process (see below for whole meeting report). The summary said: "Reception to this proposal during the meeting was positive overall. Members discussed questions about how to include inside members when voting to approve or add to meeting minutes records. NEXT STEP: We are requesting feedback on this proposal from members at our next General Meeting. **Members are asked to share thoughts about the process before the next General Meeting. This is now scheduled for October 11.** (Send through MA pen pal or email matirasurimnetwork@gmail.com)

"Agenda, Minutes, Backlog" -- from Sociocracy for All

The minutes are a written record of the meeting. They include a summary of the topics discussed, decisions made, and any action items that need to be taken. The minutes are usually distributed to all participants after the meeting and serve as a reference for future meetings.

Usually, the minutes are made by the secretary (the scribe) whose responsibility is to synthesize the content of the discussing taking place in the meeting in a way that could be "digested" by the circle.

The minutes should capture the essence of what was discussed / accomplished for easy recall when needed, both by circle members and as a proof of transparency for people outside the circle.

The minutes also have to be consented by all the members of the circle. This could happen in the same meeting or at the beginning of the next meeting. The second option is more common because some items are supplemented with additional information after the effective end of the meeting, but they will be subject to the consent of the members of the circle at the beginning of the next meeting.

NOTE: MA does not use the same language about "circles," but operates in some similar ways. During the August 23 meeting, "Parking Lot," which many organizations already use, was suggested in place of "Backlog."

Example of proposed note process:

August 23, 2023: General meeting of Matir Asurim. Shared in Core Group list, 8/23/23.

1) EXPLORATION: We discussed a proposal for a more consistent and systematized reporting on general meeting minutes. [link to proposal] Reception to this proposal during the meeting was positive overall. Members discussed questions about how to include inside members when voting to approve or add to meeting minutes records.

NEXT STEP: We are requesting feedback on this proposal from members at our next General Meeting on September 13. If you cannot attend that meeting and have thoughts, please email matirasurimnetwork@gmail.com.

2) REPORT: We heard updates from working groups.

A) Penpal group: organizing one training and one letter-writing event for the High Holidays. The theme of the letter-writing event was discussed, including an idea from an inside member to create a cache of letters to send specifically to people in solitary confinement.

NEXT STEP: Penpal team to discuss the theme on their own.

B) Membership and Wellness: Work with local hubs in Seattle and the Bay Area is ongoing. Team is scheduling a "Matir Asurim 201" presentation for members.

NEXT STEP: Per feedback from members, schedule the Matir Asurim 201 training for November 8, 2023.

C) Individual support: we heard updates about supporting an inside member to take a class. We also received updates about the conversion process of a member we are supporting.

D) Inside access: we discussed the Divrei Matir Asurim resource.

E) Communications: we announced the monthly communications meeting, shared updates about workflow for the e-newsletter, and discussed the timing of Matir Asurim's Tishrei e-newsletter.

NEXT STEP: consider adapting MA's resource "[9 Commitments for 2021](#)" into our 5784 greeting.

F) Jewish Resources: we discussed the High Holiday resources and members had several questions: Is the Rosh Hashanah mailing separate from the Yom Kippur mailing, or are they combined? Have we received feedback from inside members about the content of the High Holiday materials?

3) REPORT: Updates on the campaign surrounding [HR 4972](#), the End Solitary Confinement Act, and the group discussed ways that Matir Asurim can further support this bill, including contacting local representatives and urging synagogues to vocally support the bill.

4) EXPLORATION: After speaking about the effort with HR 4972, the group discussed Matir Asurim's general strategy around advocacy, including how to get people involved and using advocacy as a springboard for internal and external political education.

PARKING LOT: these questions were surfaced to discuss at a later meeting: What is our strategy and interest around advocacy in the future? Do we want to be responsive or proactive? Should we focus on legislative or individual advocacy? Do we need a new team for this?

5) SENDING BLESSINGS: The group shared names of inside members that are in their thoughts/prayers.

NEXT MEETING: We need a facilitator for our September 13 meeting! (Rescheduled to October 11.)

Advocacy Work and Solitary Confinement

Work to End Solitary Confinement

Following the August 9 meeting, MA officially signed on as an endorser of the End Solitary Confinement Act (US House of Representatives HR 4972). Social Good Fund, our non-profit fiscal sponsor, was notified. Here is our 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.

We implore other Jewish institutions and organizations to get behind the work of ending solitary and advocating for prison justice more broadly.

Following the meeting, an inside member suggested MA advocacy on this issue include state-level efforts.

More General Advocacy Issues

Our "Parking Lot," list of issues not yet addressed, includes the following questions:

- What is our strategy and interest around advocacy in the future?
- Do we want to be responsive or proactive? Should we focus on legislative or individual advocacy?
- Do we need a new team for this?

In response to these queries, an inside member suggested a new team that would focus on both legislative and individual advocacy, adding:

[For individual advocacy] MA should form a plan on following up on the matter... a follow up plan must be put in place to protect the inside individual from any retaliation they may face. MA wants to be responsive, proactive and be persistent...until positive results are received.

Working Group and Team News (postponed until after October 11 meeting)

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

Yahrzeits:

9/18/1970. **Jimi Hendrix**. Musician.

9/18/2020. **Ruth Bader Ginsburg**. Supreme Court justice.

9/20/1984. **Steve Goodman**. Musician, composer, folk singer.

9/30/1919. **Hundreds** of Blacks and five whites killed following Black labor uprising, Elaine, Arkansas.

9/30/1941. **33,771** Jews killed at Babyn (Babi) Yar, near Kyiv, Ukraine, in Nazi occupation.

Recent Losses:

September 8. Thousands killed in earthquake, Morocco

September 11. More than 11,000 killed in flood, Libya

Executions Scheduled:

September 21. **Anthony Sanchez**, Oklahoma

October 3. **Michael Zack**, Florida

October 10. **Jedidiah Murphy**. Texas

Healing and Special Concern: All lacking community. All struggling with *teshuvah* [repair, return] in this season. All suffering from violence in any of its many forms. All who seek healing of spirit; those needing medical attention and healing of body.

Celebration: Matir Asurim members trying new paths or reconnections in the new year.

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

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

----- **COMMUNITY NOTES**

JEWISH CURRENTS writes:

Help us spread the word: *Jewish Currents* offers a free subscription to anyone who is incarcerated in the US. We currently have over 75 incarcerated subscribers. Those readers have signed up through word-of-mouth or been connected to us through community organizers. Some of the most meaningful letters we receive are from incarcerated readers telling us how much our work means to them.

In addition to providing the magazine free-of-charge to all incarcerated readers that request it, we are proud to platform the work of those writing and working from inside America's prisons.

If you or a loved one is incarcerated and would like to receive *Jewish Currents*, email subscriptions@jewishcurrents.org, with the recipient's name and address. Or contact *Jewish Currents*, PO Box 130049, Brooklyn NY, 11213.

TORAH EXPLORATIONS: *Jonah and Yom Kippur*

The Book of Jonah and Yom Kippur

The Book of Jonah is short: 48 verses in four chapters. Scholars date it anywhere from 700 - 100 BCE. When it is read on Yom Kippur, three verses from the prophet Micah are added for the closing.*

We first meet Jonah when he is given a prophetic mission. He is commanded to tell the people of Nineveh that they must repent of wicked ways or they will be destroyed. Instead, he runs away, sailing off on a ship that experiences a terrible storm. The sailors throw him into the sea, where a great fish swallows him. Jonah prays in the belly of the fish, and the fish spits him onto dry land.

Finally, Jonah goes on with his mission to convince the people of Nineveh to repent. (We hear all the time from prophets who say that the people of Israel are failing to repent. But --) In record time, Nineveh repents. Jonah is very angry, feeling that justice was not done and/or that he looks foolish, having predicted doom.

The book ends with Jonah finding rest under a plant, called a *kikayon*, and then God arranging for the plant to be killed. Jonah is even more miserable, telling God he is so upset about the plant that he wants to die. This experience is part of an argument between Jonah and God. It ends with God saying:

You cared about the *kikayon*, which you did not work for or grow; it arrived in a night and perished in a night; and should I not care about Nineveh, that great city, with more than 120,000 people that cannot tell their right hand from their left hand [are too ignorant to be responsible], and also many animals? (4:10-11)**

On Yom Kippur, the reading concludes:

Who is a God like You,
Forgiving iniquity
And remitting transgression—
Not staying angry forever
Toward the remnant of Your own people,
Because You love graciousness!
[God] will take us back in love,
Quashing our iniquities.
You will hurl [*tashlikh*] all our sins
Into the depths of the sea.
You will keep faith with Jacob,
Loyalty to Abraham,
As You promised on oath to our fathers
In days gone by. (Micah 7:18-20)***

* A haftarah is a prophetic passage, following the Torah portion, during the ritual public reading. There is a tradition that a haftarah must end in words of comfort, no matter how harsh the main portion is. This sometimes involves jumping ahead in the same book; sometimes, closing with words of a different prophet.

** Mash-up of several translations. These are the last verses of book.

*** JPS Revised translation (2006-2023). Verse 18 echoes attributes of God, from Exodus 34:7, recited on festival days. Verse 19 is part of the Tashlikh ceremony, when sins are "hurled" or "cast" into the sea on Rosh Hashanah, in hopes they will be "wiped away."

TORAH EXPLORATIONS: Jonah and Yom Kippur

"Finding Justice in Jonah"

adapted from an article by Rabbanit Dr. Liz Shayne

Original version of this article is available, for those with internet access, on [Yeshivat Maharat's website](#).

We read the story of Jonah on Yom Kippur. Jonah is a troubling figure for the rabbis. He experiences revelation and then immediately turns tail and heads away from where he was told to go. Why does Jonah run? The rabbis of the Talmud offer two answers.

First, they suggest that Jonah was upset that the nations of the world might repent and make Israel look bad by comparison. Second, they suggest that Jonah was afraid that Nineveh would repent; that would avert God's decree of destruction; and, therefore, Jonah—would be seen as a false prophet. There are many other suggestions from teachers over the centuries. But, I am confused by the rabbinic confusion. I find Jonah's behavior completely reasonable under the circumstances. Maybe we need a neurodivergent lens to understand Jonah's behavior.

As part of the Center for Lived Torah, my goal in these essays is to explore what a neurodivergent perspective can bring to our tradition and to the stories that we visit and revisit every year. For me, I look at Torah from my own autistic perspective and, I hope, share with you how that perspective informs my relationship with Judaism. I want to invite you into my world view so you can see what Jonah looks like through my senses and how I experience this story. I want to explain to you why I am so untroubled by Jonah's refusal to answer God's call and what I, sliding so neatly in Jonah's sandals, hear as the message from this book.

**I want to explain to you
why I am so untroubled
by Jonah's refusal to answer God's call and what I,
sliding so neatly in Jonah's sandals,
hear as the message from this book.**

The main reason I struggle with the question about Jonah's motivation is that Jonah himself gives us an answer that makes perfect sense. Jonah is bitter when the people of Nineveh repent. He says "Oh God! Is this not just what I said when I was still in my own country? That is why I fled beforehand to Tarshish. For I know that You are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment" (Jonah 4:2). Jonah objects that God spares the Assyrians the consequences of their actions. They have done evil and they do not deserve to retain their status as the capital of the Assyrian Empire. Jonah is not particularly impressed with the fasting and the public repentance; but he knows that God finds such behavior acceptable and averts their doom. Jonah fears that there will be no real change, and Nineveh will continue to behave cruelly.

**We are the ones who refuse to sell out. When something is wrong,
we say so and demand justice.**

It has often been said that one of the hallmarks of autistic thinking is a deep commitment to what we perceive is right. Some might say we do not do nuance very well. Studies show that autistic people will stick with our principles even when it is no longer to our advantage. We are the ones who refuse to sell

out. When something is wrong, we say so and demand justice. Jonah wants no part in helping the people of Nineveh evade consequences.

The text of Jonah is oddly silent as to the nature of their sin. What if their crime was war and murder?

How could they possibly repent, and how long would such a change of heart could last? How could a city of conquerors and murderers be allowed to retain its might? That, at least, seems to be Jonah's question. Jonah wants to see the city overthrown, wants to ensure that things cannot go back to the evil of earlier days. I find his perspective resonates strongly with me. When the powerful receive nothing more than a slap on the wrist for their behavior, when bullies act contrite for a few days...that is not justice. Those of us who tend to be the targets of bullies and biased systems grow tired of discovering that yet another commitment to repentance was an empty promise.

When the powerful receive nothing more than a slap on the wrist for their behavior, when bullies act contrite for a few days...that is not justice.

Like Jonah, I want to believe in and live in a world where evildoers face consequences. Also like Jonah, I am attracted to the idea of running away when I cannot see a path forward. Like me, Jonah is someone disappointed with a world that persists unchanged, without consequences for those who have done wrong and safeguards to prevent them from doing it again. Jonah's fury speaks straight to my neurodivergent stubbornness that the world must not be allowed to remain unjust.

God's response to Jonah is not to argue with him about the nature of justice or to defend the repentance of the Assyrians. God, instead, makes Jonah live out a parable. He sends a kikayon. This unusual word in the bible is sometimes translated as gourd or castor bean/ricinus plant. The plant grows and gives Jonah shade and then, after a day, God sends a worm to destroy the plant and Jonah is once again miserable. God asks Jonah whether he is really that upset over a plant and Jonah responds that he is "grieved unto death" (Jonah 4:9). And God answers, "And should not I care about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not yet know their right hand from their left, and many animals as well!" (Jonah 4:11).

God, in God's own way, agrees with Jonah's point that what happened in Nineveh is not just. And God is also right: there are more principles than justice at stake. The wellbeing of all the souls and beasts of Nineveh weighs heavily on God and God would right the world with as little pain as possible. God has both a commitment to justice and a duty of care. God wants Jonah to learn to be guided by both of those principles. How, God seems to ask, do we bring consequences to those who sinned without harming those without a say? God challenges Jonah to articulate what justice is for an evil city of more than one hundred and twenty thousand, most of whom do not have any knowledge of that good or evil done in their name. And Jonah gives no answer.

The text ends at this unresolved point. The heart of this text is Jonah and God's struggle over the nature of justice. The book of Jonah ends without resolution because Jonah is right. Justice has not been served. But justice cannot be served justly, not while honoring what we owe to all living creatures. The book of Jonah is, to me, both a mirror and a lamp. It mirrors my own impulses, best and worst, to see justice served and to have those who cause pain have that pain rebound back onto them. And it is a lamp for me, asking me to make space for both justice and care in the work that I do. In the emptiness at the end of the book, the real work of pursuing justice without losing sight of all those for whom we care begins.

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Rabbanit Dr. Liz Shayne is the Director of Academic Affairs at Yeshivat Maharat She writes and teaches about everything from how the Talmud is like the internet to the future of robots in halakha.

Maharat works for a world in which Judaism is relevant, Jewish communities are educated, and diverse leaders guide individuals to live spiritually engaged lives. Its mission is to educate, ordain and invest in passionate and committed Orthodox women who model a dynamic Judaism to inspire and support individuals and communities.

TORAH EXPLORATIONS: *Jonah and Yom Kippur*

Harvey and Jonah: Big Things

V. Spatz

The main characters in the stage-play and movie, "Harvey," are Elwood P. Dowd and Harvey, a 6'-tall rabbit that only Dowd can see...at least, at first. At one point, Dowd explains:

Harvey and I sit in the bars... have a drink or two...play the juke box....[People] come over...and they sit with us...and they drink with us... and they talk to us. They tell about the big terrible things they've done and the big wonderful things they'll do. Their hopes, and their regrets, and their loves, and their hates. All very large, because nobody ever brings anything small into a bar.

And then I introduce them to Harvey... and he's bigger and grander than anything they offer me. And when they leave, they leave impressed.

Many of us come into the high holidays like the people Dowd meets at the bar: carrying big things with us -- things we've done or failed to do, hopes unfulfilled. And, in some ways, the fall holidays are a little like meeting Harvey: The season's themes and readings introduce us to things that are "bigger and grander" than what we're carrying. We're not meant to feel small, but to change focus.

"Big" in the Book of Jonah

"Big" is key to the Book of Jonah, too. But, like most of the characters in "Harvey," Jonah seems to miss big things around him, at least at first.

A form of "*gadol*," Hebrew for "big, great, or grow," appears at least 14 times in the Book of Jonah: Nineveh is a big city. The storm is big. The sailors have "great fear" of God. The fish is big. The people, from the littlest to the greatest, repent. But, there is no "big" in Jonah's prayer (2:3-10).

When Jonah meets big things, he doesn't seem to relate...until, near the story's end, he experiences Nineveh's repentance as a "great evil" (4:1) and then he has "great joy" under the *kikayon* (4:6).

Are we, like Jonah, missing "big" things --

- things important to others, so causing harm in our failing to notice?
- things that might help us, slowing our own progress without them?
- a bigger or different picture, which might point a new way forward?

"Harvey" and Hopes

At another point in the play/movie, a doctor is interviewing Dowd. The doctor keeps asking about Harvey's name, expecting Dowd to say that HE named Harvey, maybe for someone who had died or a childhood companion:

"Think carefully Dowd. Didn't you ever know anybody by that name?"

"No, no, not one, Doctor. Maybe that's why I always had such hopes for it."

Harvey's magic offers Dowd a relationship unburdened by past expectations or errors. We don't have that option. But hope still needs the possibility of something completely new. Repair is not possible, if we are convinced that everything is already set. Both "Harvey" and Jonah remind us that hope requires a level of uncertainty -- about ourselves, those around us, and the world at large.

Who Knows? Maybe?

NOT knowing, "maybe," and possibility of change are important in Jonah's story. Contemporary teachers Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg and Judy Klitsner both write about this.

Early on, in the middle of the storm, the sailors say to Jonah: "Get up, call on your God, **perhaps** God will think about us, and we won't be lost." Later, Jonah thinks about Nineveh: "**Who knows**, but God may turn and relent" (1:6, 3:9).

Zornberg writes:

'Perhaps' is a peculiarly Jewish response to the mystery of God's ways. **'Who knows?'** speaks of humility and hope and a sense of the incalculable element in the relation of God and human beings....Jonah will need to lose some of his knowledge so as to rouse himself to his own distance from God. -- *The Murmuring Deep* (Schocken, 2009), p.90, bold added

Klitsner also writes about "maybe" and not knowing, as well as the need for new perspectives.

The Hebrew word, "Nineveh" (*nun-yud-nun-vav-hey*), includes the letters of Jonah's name (*yud-vav-nun-hey*). Klitsner points this out and argues that part of Jonah's task was to recognize himself in the city. Instead of complaining that Nineveh doesn't deserve mercy, he should "see himself as one with the world," capable of change and in need of divine help, just like everyone else.

Can Jonah

(יונה [yud-vav-nun-hey])

see himself in the city

(נינוה [nun-yud-nun-vav-hey])?

Can we?

Image: Hebrew letters for "Jonah" and "Nineveh" within the sentence: Can Jonah [yud-vav-nun-hey] see himself in the city [non-yud-nun-vav-hey]?

Klitsner believes Jonah's silence at the end of the story means that he is learning about "**maybe**":

In this silence lies the hope and the opportunity of [maybe]...the potential of human beings to imagine themselves as other than they have always been and to undertake the courageous task of corrective repair...

-- *Subversive Sequels* (Maggid, 2011), p.29

Zornberg links Jonah's new perspective with willingness to stand still and reflect.

Flight and Stance

For most of his story, Jonah is in motion:

- God speaks to Jonah in verse 1:1;
- Jonah is told to go to Nineveh (1:2);
- Jonah flees, instead, to Tarshish (1:3);
- Jonah continues to move — under his own power, on the boat, or in the belly of the great fish — until chapter 4;
- "Jonah" means "dove."

Zornberg teaches that this motion tells us a lot about Jonah. He flees because he is not yet ready for the self-reflection required to remain still:

To stand one's ground in the human place between death and life is, in itself, to cry out.... His flight, his death wish, his anger--none of these rouse him to curiosity about his own soul, its deep currents and crosscurrents.

-- *The Murmuring Deep*, p.84, p.91

God's last word is a question that Jonah must answer beyond the pages of the book. The reader, Zornberg writes, is left with the same question. The key for Jonah is learning to function without knowing all the answers: "Perhaps, for a moment, he trusts his experience in God's presence enough not to need to already know its meaning" (p.103).

Small and Huge

The Book of Jonah reflects an age-old tension between individual and collective.

On the one hand, an individual is one tiny voice among many. High holidays themes stress that we are a mere breath, a fleeting shadow, here today and gone tomorrow.

On the other hand, the individual is supremely important. We are taught, "even one individual who repents is forgiven and the whole world is forgiven with him" (Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 86a).

Overall, Jonah's tale seems to value him as an individual, putting the fate of an entire city into his hands. On the other, his own concerns are ignored, telling him: "Really, it's just not about you! Get going with your task!"

We find this tension, too, in "Harvey." Dowd says that Harvey is "bigger and grander than anything they offer me." This kind of thinking can be helpful, when it comes to troubles, recognizing that we're all facing something of the same challenges together.

...Prayers at the high holidays are in the first-person plural: We sinned, we are ready to work on improvement, forgive us (we're in this together)....

But Dowd is also very focused on the needs of others, as individuals, and on building and repairing relationships, with the help of Harvey. This reflects another side of those plural prayers: Until we all get what we need for repair, our communities are in this mess together.

In Jewish teaching for the high holidays, and year-round, an individual is always small and also huge. We've all got a lot to learn and a lot to share.

Met a woman in a bar
Told her I was hard to get to know
And near impossible to forget
She said I had an ego on me
The size of Texas

Well, I'm new here, and I forget
Does that mean big, or small?

No matter how far wrong you've gone
You can always turn around
—Gil Scott-Heron, "I'm New Here," 2010

Chase, Mary. *Harvey: A Comedy in Three Acts*. 1944 stage-play. 1950 Universal Studios movie starred James Stewart. Many additional stage and movie versions. Dramatists Play Services.

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Zornberg, Avivah Gottlieb. *The Murmuring Deep: Reflections on the Biblical Unconscious*. New York, NY: Schocken, 2009

These thoughts about Jonah and "Harvey" are adapted from a sermon for Fabrangen Havurah, Washington, DC. Yom Kippur, 5775 (October 4, 2014) Virginia Avniel Spatz



Image credit: Gordon Johnson, via Pixabay. Alt text: Detailed drawing of an incredibly large fish, with a powerful tail and mouth, spewing a bearded, befuddled-looking man out of its mouth and toward land.

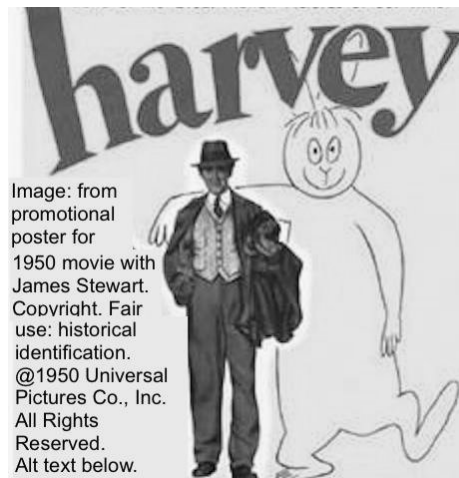


Image: from promotional poster for 1950 movie with James Stewart. Copyright. Fair use: historical identification. ©1950 Universal Pictures Co., Inc. All Rights Reserved. Alt text below.

Alt text for "Harvey" poster: Below lettering that reads, "harvey," a man stands in early 20th Century suit, vest and tie, plus fedora on his head and overcoat across his arm. The actor James Stewart is recognizable in one of his most famous roles. At the man's side is a cartoon outline of a fantastic, enormous rabbit walking on two hind legs, with an another limb around the man's shoulder. The image is copyright 1950 Universal Pictures Co, Inc.

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.

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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, 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