



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 -- Jan 2024/Shevat 5784

*Divrei Matir Asurim* 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](mailto:matirasurimnetwork@gmail.com).

### *MEETING AND OPERATIONS*

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

Matir Asurim held a general meeting on January 10. Major topic, beyond Team Updates, was review of MA's "Guiding Jewish Concepts."

The "guiding Jewish concepts" is a list of 11 Jewish ideas inspiring MA's work. It was developed when the organization formed, nearly three years ago. The list was revisited, beginning early in 2023. A small team re-read the concepts and discussed if/how they still reflect MA's vision. The "concepts" team found a lot of overlap in the 11 ideas and suggested a new, shorter list. The list of six values includes four that were already on the list and adds two new ones. The draft list was tentatively approved at the Jan 10 meeting. The draft list will be circulated for approval. Inside members should look for a separate mailing requesting feedback.

**NEXT MEETINGS:** January 24 and February 14.

#### **Team and Working Group News**

**Penpal:** Some penpals needed help with mail that was not reaching people inside. A few pairs of writers requested re-matching.

**Communications:** This team needs a new regular meeting date to fit participants' varied schedules.

**Individual support:** Plans are in the works to support one inside member who expects parole in the next few months. Another group is organizing education for an inside member choosing Judaism.

**Resources:** no new report this month.

**Hubs:** The Seattle Hub is considering a local "check-in" for penpals and other members of one congregation who are engaged in MA work.

**Finance/Fund-Raising:** This team is organizing a one-time meeting to look at annual financial goals.

**Membership/Wellness:** A meeting of the Core Organizing Team is set for January 28. This will be on a weekend, rather than weekday evening, to allow for more time and different focus on long-term organizing questions.

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

This section

- shares concerns for healing of all kinds,
- recalls teachers and loved ones whom death has taken from us, and
- marks milestones and celebrations.

Submit items for future editions through an outside penpal, or use contact information on page 1.

Memorial: **Tortuguita**, forest defender/peace activist, shot to death by police on 1/18/23 (8 Shevat)  
Friends, colleagues and family lost to mental and physical illness, violence, and age

Concern: **Kenneth Eugene Smith**, scheduled for execution in Alabama on Jan 25 (15 Shevat)

Healing: All suffering community and state violence in US, Canada, and around the world.  
All seeking healing of spirit, repair of personal conflicts, and healing of body.

Celebration: Jan 11 and 15. Birthdays of friends and fellow organizers for peace and civil rights,  
**Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel** (1907-72) and **Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.** (1929-68).

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## ***TORAH EXPLORATIONS: Contents***

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## **Schedule of Exodus Torah Reading**

<b>Hebrew title</b> [English]. Chapters: verse	Civic & Hebrew calendar dates for Shabbat the portion is read.
<b>Shemot</b> [Names]. Ex 1:1-6:1.	Jan 6. 25 Tevet
<b>Vaera</b> [I appeared]. Ex 6:2-9:35.	Jan 13. 3 Shevat
<b>Bo</b> [Come]. Ex 10:1-13:16.	Jan 20. 10 Shevat
<b>Beshalach</b> [When he let go]. Ex 13:17-17:16.	Jan 27. 17 Shevat
<b>Yitro</b> [Jethro]. Ex 18:1-20:23.	Feb 3. 24 Shevat
<b>Mishpatim</b> [Laws]. Ex 21:1-24:18.	Feb 10. 1 Adar I
<b>Terumah</b> [Donation]. Ex 25:1-27:19.	Feb 17. 8 Adar I
<b>Tetzevah</b> [You shall command]. Ex 27:2-30:10.	Feb 24. 15 Adar I
<b>Ki Tisa</b> [When you elevate]. Ex 30:11-34:35.	Mar 2. 22 Adar I
<b>Vayakhel</b> [He assembled]. Ex 35:1-38:20.	March 9. 29 Adar I.
<b>Pekudei</b> ["Accounts of"]. Ex 38:21-40:38	March 16. 6 Adar II

**NOTE:** Torah Explorations follow themes of recent and upcoming weekly readings,  
but they do not always match exactly to the reading calendar.

## ***TORAH EXPLORATIONS: from Genesis to Exodus***

In the annual Torah reading cycle, we completed the Book of Genesis on Dec. 30, 2023. We started the second book of the Torah on Jan. 6, 2024.

### **From Solstice to Sap Running**

Last month's Torah Explorations looked at the shift from Genesis to Exodus in the context of the Winter Solstice:

For Joseph as an individual, as for the Hebrew people as a whole, passage through the narrowest, darkest, and most limiting experience of oppression ultimately creates the conditions for a new, transformed life to emerge. This is built on the foundation of a deep understanding of life's true value and meaning. We see in Nature how darkness is the place from which life emerges in myriad forms: • seeds sprouting; • infants forming; • life itself originating in the depths of the waters.  
-- Adam Gottlieb, "The Narrowest Point of Light" (from Tevet *Divrei Matir Asurim*)

The theme of growth emerging from hidden places also carries into Tu B'shvat.

Historically, the new year for trees was an accounting date. It was used to keep track of tree ages for taxes and other purposes. But the holiday also had spiritual meanings.

One ancient teaching explains that the holiday is not about changes that are obvious from the outside. The new year for trees does not mark sprouting of leaves or fruit. It marks a time when "sap begins to run." This process begins underground, sometimes when the ground is still hard or frozen on the surface. So, the holiday honors changes that are happening, beyond our notice.

Tu B'shvat can help remind us that, even if it's not obvious: there is still promise and hope and growth.

Tu B'shvat falls on Jan 24-25 this year.

Themes of promise and hope and growth follow us from Genesis into Exodus in many ways.

**"For Healing and Love. Here I am"** from *A Way In Jewish Mindfulness* by Rabbi Yael

**"For Healing and Love"** (as 2024 begins and Genesis closes)

Jacob has died and the brothers are frightened  
That now that their father is gone,  
Joseph will seek revenge for the anguish and pain of the past.

The brothers turn to Joseph pleading for forgiveness  
And offering him their servitude.

With tears in his eyes, Joseph says to them,  
Do not be afraid, I am not all-powerful.  
Do not be afraid, our actions often generate results  
That are different from what we intended.  
Life unfolds in mystery,  
And the Infinite Presence is always with us.

Joseph spoke these words with kindness, right to their hearts. -- Gen 50:19-21

"For Healing and Love"  
and "Hineini, Here I Am"  
– Meditations associated with  
Torah portions  
*Vayechi* and *Shemot* –  
from Rabbi Yael Levy  
*A Way In Jewish Mindfulness*.  
Shared with permission.

(cont. p. 4)

**("For Healing and Love," cont. from p.4)**

The first book of the Torah ends with a calls for us  
-- To reach for forgiveness,  
-- To turn toward healing,  
-- To commit to act from and for love.

The close of Genesis also calls us  
-- To remember the power of our words  
-- And to do our best to speak with kindness,  
-- And care for each other's  
tender and vulnerable hearts,  
Even when we are in pain,  
Even when we disagree.

Let us call on the Infinite Presence  
to help guide our way:

Bless us with  
The generosity of earth,  
The adaptability of water,  
The vast perspective of sky,  
And the fierce, fires of compassion.

Let us be souls who, with grace and mercy,  
Act for the benefit of all beings.  
Help us remember that every deed of kindness  
Carries great strength and power.

And please,  
help us align our words, our actions,  
Our very beings,  
For love, for healing, for peace.

***Hineini, Here I Am***

Bare trees reach and dance in the winter sky  
Birds sing in the early morning  
As the rising sun casts rays of pink.

In our book we close the chapter on the beginnings of creation  
And turn to the exodus, to the leaving,  
And our new becoming.

Here the Divine Mystery reveals itself in a different way.  
Out of a burning

It says "*I will be that I will be, this is my name,*  
I am everywhere, in all things, and I am calling you.  
Now take off your shoes,  
The ground you stand upon is holy." (See Moses at the Burning Bush, Exodus 3)

It can be difficult to hear and hard to imagine  
Something with us in the pain,  
In the rawness, in the trauma,  
Something with us in the brokenness of life.

But the voice is persistent, it whispers, it shouts,  
I am that I am. I will be that I will be.  
I am the breath of all life, the essence of all being  
And I need you.

The very ground we stand upon is holy.  
And the Divine Presence is calling,  
In need of us.

May we pause and listen.  
May we turn and gaze saying, I do not know.  
And as we look at the fires that are burning  
May we hear our names being called.

And even as the mind might respond,  
Who am I that I should go  
Who am I, what could I possibility do?  
May we reach for *hineni*  
And say, Here I am  
Ready and willing to go, to do, to be  
For healing, for love

## *Exodus Background*

There are many ways to read the bible and to relate to it in our own lives. In addition, each book of the bible looks differently at relationships between individuals, communities, and God. Rabbi W. Gunther Plaut (z"l, 1912-2012) helped many English readers understand the ancient books of the Torah and their links to centuries of Jewish teaching. This introduction is based on his work. (See also note below.)

### **The Book of Exodus and Its Themes**

Rabbi Plaut describes the Book of Exodus as a continuation of Genesis with some major differences. In Genesis, we meet members of a particular family line -- from Abraham and Sarah through to the grand- and great-grand children of Jacob. At the close of Genesis, Jacob's extended family is living in *Mitzrayim*, biblical Egypt. They become "the physical and spiritual forebears of the people Israel."

Exodus is the book which speaks of the physical and spiritual birth of Israel as a nation. It contains the stories of enslavement and liberation, of revelation and wanderings, of belief and apostasy...\*\*

Plaut goes on to say that Exodus contains basic laws, as well as rules about national worship.

Exodus has two settings: *Mitzrayim*, and then the wilderness of Sinai. He identifies the timeframe for the book's action as late 13th century BCE. so

about 3300 years ago. (Deciding when any part of the bible was written is another question entirely.)

In biblical chronology, the events of Exodus take place in the years 2338 - 2488. (Creation is Year 1, and we are now in year 5784.)

Rabbi Plaut says the books of Genesis and Exodus take different perspectives on how God and humans relate. Genesis, he says, is "a mixture of myth, legend, distant memory, and search for origins." It centers "the will of God as the hinge on which human events must turn." Exodus shifts toward events "in the realm of history." This isn't how modern readers understand history, though, Rabbi Plaut explains. Like many other teachers, he says Exodus is not necessarily what we would consider a book of "facts." Instead, it is "history grounded in faith." Many teachers, including Plaut, talk about the narrative themes of Exodus:

-- enslavement and redemption,

-- human oppression and divine leadership.

cont. p.6

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### NOTES:

\*\* "**Apostasy**" is a strong word that is used somewhat differently in different religious communities. According to Merriam-Webster on-line it means: "an act of refusing to continue to follow, obey, or recognize a religious faith" or "abandonment of a previous loyalty."

**Rabbi Plaut.** Rabbi W. Gunther Plaut was a rabbi and biblical scholar. He was born in Germany and lived most of his life in Toronto, Ontario. His translation and commentary on the Torah was first published in 1981. This book was ground-breaking at the time, giving English readers a new way to read the Torah, with commentary and scholarship. The work was updated in 2005 and is still published by Union for Reform Judaism.

...Personal note: Rabbi Plaut was visiting relatives in Washington, DC, one summer late in his life. This author (Matir Asurim's volunteer editor) met him and had the opportunity to learn briefly with him then. So, everyone reading this is connected in a small, direct way to a teacher who had a great impact on the English-speaking Jewish world.....

("Exodus and Themes," cont. from p.5)

Plaut also notes the theme of "an infant who is to become ruler or savior." First, the child is in danger, out in the elements, and then "wondrously rescued." This theme appears in the story of Moses, but it is also found in other ancient cultures' stories.

Plaut identifies three major themes around how God and people relate:

**wilderness:** for most of Exodus, the people are separated from others, developing as a nation in relationship to God;

**covenant:** agreements between God and the people, what is expected on both sides;

**exaltation:** celebrating God is key: from the first Passover, to revelation at Sinai, and then in the on-going travels with the portable Tabernacle.

## Lands of Past and Future

**Canaan and *Mitzrayim*.** Canaan was once home to Jacob's clan; other family lived there as well: the family of Jacob's brother, Esau; their parents' generation -- Rebecca and Isaac and Ishmael; and the generation before that: Abraham and Sarah and, later, Ketura.

At the start of Exodus, however, none of the Yisraelites ever lived in Canaan. By the time The Book of Exodus starts, the Yisraelites have been living in *Mitzrayim* for centuries. But *Mitzrayim* isn't a "new" land for the Yisraelites.

When there was famine in Canaan, *Mitzrayim* meant survival. But the place that once saved the Yisraelites turned to a source of disaster. The land where their ancestors lived for hundreds of years was no longer an option for them, and they had to escape.... although, the people sometimes miss things from before or seek to go back due to fear.

**Padan-Aram and Canaan.** Near the end of Genesis, Jacob reminds us that his beloved wife Rachel died before the family settled in Canaan (Gen 48:7). This also reminds us that Padan-Aram -- where many family members had lived -- is now in the past for Jacob's clan.

Rachel was strongly connected to Padan-Aram, the land of her birth and home to Jacob's extended family for decades. She died in childbirth, while the family was still on the road (Genesis 35), so she never lives in the "new" land of Canaan.

Later, prophetic text also links Rachel to the future. Jeremiah 31:15-17 relates her burial by the side of the road with the exile of Yisraelites in 722 and 586 BCE.

***Mitzrayim* and Canaan.** Joseph, who is one of Rachel's two sons, only lives in Canaan for 17 of his 110 years. He is linked, instead, with *Mitzrayim*.

Beginning with Exodus 15, *Mitzrayim* is in the past for the Yisraelites. God promises to take the people out of *Mitzrayim* and into "a land flowing with milk and honey" (Exod 3:17). But that land is still in the future. The Yisraelites remain in the wilderness throughout the rest of Exodus and the final three books of the Torah. Long-ago ancestors may have lived in Canaan. But all memory of it is lost to the people, so the place they are headed seems new.

In the last chapter of Genesis, Joseph is still in power in *Mitzrayim*, and he arranges to have his father, Jacob, buried in Canaan (Genesis 49:33-50:14). One thing to note is that many people from *Mitzrayim* are involved in Jacob's burial. So many that it apparently looks like *Mitzrayim* mourning to the Canaanite locals.

Toward the end of Genesis, there seems to be some degree of mixing of the *Mitzrayim-ite* and Yisraelite peoples. But there is still a sense that one land is to be the future for the Yisraelites.

This is highlighted in the report of Joseph's death:

At length, Joseph said to his brothers, "I am about to die. God will surely take notice of you [*pakod yifkod*] and bring you up from this land to the land promised on oath to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob."

So Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, "When God has taken notice of you, you shall carry up my bones from here." **cont. p.7**

("Lands of Past and Future," cont. from p.6)

[quotation from Genesis continues]  
Joseph died at the age of one hundred and ten years; and he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in *Mitzrayim*. -- Genesis 50:24-26

### Language and Story Links

The very last thing in the Book of Genesis is a coffin [*aron*]. The bible text does not say that the coffin was buried. That leaves an element of suspense, as Genesis closes. We read in Exodus that Joseph's bones are carried out of *Mitzrayim* (Exod 13:19). But we are never told, directly, where the coffin was during the enslavement period and how it was found again.

Commentary offers many inventive ideas about the coffin. But the key point is that suspense. There is something important unfinished at the end of the Genesis story. And we take that sense of incompleteness into the Book of Exodus

The Hebrew word "*pakod*" [*pey-kuf-dalet*, טָפַח] is also carried from Genesis into Exodus.

*Pakod* can mean: appoint, observe, visit, watch over, pay attention, take note. It sometimes carries the sense of noting a far-off promise or set of circumstances.

At the end of Genesis, Joseph tells his brothers that God will "take notice." This links the whole family line -- from Sarah and Abraham through to the descendants of Joseph and his brothers -- under "God's notice." But this also links the whole family line under a sense that God's promise is distant, not realized yet.

At the Burning Bush, God tells Moses: "...I have surely noticed you [*pakod pakadti*]..." (Exod 3:16). The Yisraelites are told there is a promise, but they don't know when it will come true. It is still distant, not realized yet.

The same tension is a central part of Judaism. After all, the Torah itself never brings us into that "land of milk and honey." It's always off in the future. That sense of future promise is part of the holiday of Tu B'shvat (see also above) and many other parts of Jewish thought.

## Promise and Experience

### The Four Promises of Exodus

In Torah portion *Vaera*, God tells Moses an odd thing: "I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty [*El Shaddai*], not by My name YHVH..." (Ex 6:3). This is odd because the name YHVH does not seem new: It was already shared

- with Moses (Exod 3:6),
- with the Yisraelites (Exod 3:15) and
- with the elders (Ex 3:18); and
- throughout the first meeting of Aaron and Moses with Pharaoh (starting at Exod 5:1).

So, what does it mean, this "but (by) my name YHVH I was not known"? What is still unknown?

Umberto Cassuto (Italy, 1883–1951) argues that this unknown is a future experience. God uses four different God verbs to describe what is coming, and the Yisraelites won't know God as Liberator until **all four promises** have been fulfilled. And that means that the Yisraelites need new experiences in order to learn something new about liberation.

In Exodus 6:3-7, God tells Moses that four things will happen: "I will...

- ...bring you out -- *hotzeiti*"
- ...redeem you -- *gaalti*"
- ...rescue you -- *hitzalti*"
- ...take you (as a partner/spouse) -- *lakachti*"

Only after that --

"...you shall know that I am YHVH your God, who brings you out from beneath the burdens [*sivlot*] of *Mitzrayim*." -- Exod 6:7

("The Four Promises," cont. from p.7)

Cassuto teaches that knowing God by the special name, "YHVH," requires the Yisraelites to experience God as divine Liberator. The Yisraelites, as a people, won't know God as YHVH until they collectively experience getting "out from beneath the burdens of *Mitzrayim*."

We can also relate this to our own group experiences: Our study of Torah. Our Passover celebrations. Our group intentions in prayer, meditation, fasting, and ritual. Our work for collective healing. Our efforts to support the liberation for all. All of these collective experiences can help us to know God as divine Liberator.... and, as with everything in Judaism: there is always more to learn and do.

The four verbs of Exodus 6:6-7 are linked to the four cups of wine at the Passover seder. And every year, we're supposed to learn new things about liberation.

### **In Every Generation:**

In each and every generation,

a person must see themselves as personally coming forth from *Mitzrayim*.

As it is said: "And you shall tell your child on that day, saying:

'It is because of what YHVH did for me when I came forth out of *Mitzrayim*.'" (Exod 13:8)

-- Mishnah Pesachim 10:5-6 [early writings on Passover]; also B. Pes 116b [Babylonian Talmud]

The Exodus story itself shows that the people are sometimes tempted to go back to the "Narrow Place" that is *Mitzrayim*, rather than experiencing the scary uncertainty of the wilderness. And society at large seems to shy away from long, complicated journeys and instead decide that we have somehow come "far enough." But, we have long known that "none of us is free if one of us is chained."

### **Liberation for Whom?**

For centuries, Jews and other readers of Exodus have used the idea of "Pharaoh" to talk about all kinds of oppression that needs to be addressed.

In the mid-20th Century U.S. Civil Rights movement, Exodus was often used in calls for action. We find this, for example, in the teachings of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel -- who worked together for racial justice and other liberation of oppressed people. (Both have January birthdays -- see p.3.)

A specific set of teachings called "Black Liberation Theology" also began with Christian teachers in the U.S. (See the note about Rev James Cone in Chanukah *Divrei Matir Asurim*.) Liberation Theology played a big role in African and in Latin American Christianity, and it also appears in Jewish thought.

Liberation Theology has been a big influence on how the wider culture reads Exodus. Many people, regardless of faith, view the Exodus story as teaching that God is on the side of the oppressed.

More recently, teachers have asked us to consider what it means to "self-identify as God's chosen people" when reading Exodus. Questions are raised about the idea of God "taking sides" at all.

And what about the people who are NOT liberated in the Exodus story? One scholar calls attention to "incomplete witness." This happens, she says, when we use Exodus to celebrate liberation for some people without acknowledging "harm done to oppressed peoples somewhere, in the name of God."

-- Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan. "How Liberating is Exodus and for Whom?"

(*Exodus and Deuteronomy*. Fortress Press, 2012)



## Variety and Power

### Who are "The People"?

Some Jewish teachings, and popular books and movies, assume that "The People" who left *Mitzrayim* were one big group of similar folks. But other teachings give a more complicated view.

**Yisraelites:** Teachings, from as early as the 2nd Century CE, say that most of the Yisraelites never left *Mitzrayim*. Many were either too scared or too comfortable to leave. Only one in five left, and the rest died in the plague of darkness (Exod 10:20).

**Mitzrayim-ites:** *Shemot Rabbah* (older teachings put together around 1200 CE) describes three groups of *Mitzrayim-ites*:

- Pharaoh, and any other oppressors who did not repent;
- those who revolted against Pharaoh, who gave provisions (Ex 12:35) or offered other help to the Yisraelites; and
- those who left with the Yisraelites: "and also the *erev-rav*" (Ex 12:38) -- the "mixed multitudes" or "motley mob."

It is important to notice the variety of people involved here, according to Rabbi Gerry Serotta. Looking beyond category descriptions leads to different questions about groups in bible text. If

the people who left *Mitzrayim* are not all the same -- one ethnic group, or one class, otherwise all alike -- we can ask about their choices:

- What made some people leave the Narrow Place to seek liberation?
- Can we be more like THAT?

### Learning Variety

More generally, decades of interfaith and peace work taught Rabbi Gerry the power of noticing and celebrating variety in the bible... and then using that practice to honor difference in the world.

One example is the Tower of Babel story. The people settled in one place, becoming "of one language" or, "one idea." God objects and scatters the people (Genesis 11). Rabbi Gerry teaches that this shows: "variety is God's plan."

Later, the Exodus narrative keeps repeating: "You are MY people and I am YOUR God" and "Let My people go that they may serve ME." This might seem like God choosing one group and taking sides. But we recall that different paths led different people out of *Mitzrayim*. And that suggests that there is no single path to relationship with the divine.

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**Rabbi Gerry Serotta** was Executive Director of the Interfaith Council of Washington (DC) and helped organize other interfaith efforts in the DC region and internationally. He was Hillel Director at George Washington University and among the founders of Breira, New Jewish Agenda, and Rabbis for Human Rights, North America.

The teaching above is adapted from *Rereading Exodus along the Anacostia*, more information on p.12.

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### Varieties of Power

In Exod 1:15, we meet two midwives, Shifrah and Puah. The way they are introduced in Hebrew can be read two ways: "*m'yalleldot* [midwives] *ha-ivriyot* [Hebrew]," can mean either "Hebrews who are midwives" or "midwives to the Hebrews."

Jewish commentary follows both possibilities. In addition, commentary sometimes describes Shifrah and Puah as "head-midwives" or supervisors, because there are too many births for two women to handle. (cont. p.10)

("Varieties of Power," cont. from p.9)

Exodus says that Pharaoh told Shifrah and Puah to kill all the Hebrew boys "on the birth stool." They refused but escaped punishment. Because Shifrah and Puah "feared God," God rewards them. And the Hebrew people continue to grow more numerous. (Exod 1:15-21).

Jewish teachers over the centuries have written a great deal about Shifrah and Puah.

...Exodus itself does not tell us much about what happens between ordinary Yisrael-ites and Mitzrayim-ites. And we only learn tiny bits about how Pharaoh's government really worked. So, a lot is left up to our imaginations. The two midwives offer a big opening for us to consider what it was like to live under Pharaoh....

How did Shifrah and Puah operate in the oppressive system around them?

Maybe they were "going along to get along" in a tough system, but then they had a change of heart when Pharaoh demanded outright baby killing.

Maybe they had always operated as humanely as they could, trying to protect the dignity and health of the mothers and babies in their care.

Maybe they were part of a whole network of people working together for everyone's welfare, despite Pharaoh's government.

### **Enemies, Neighbors, Fellow-Resistors?**

Over the centuries, some teachers have viewed all Yisrael-ites and Mitzrayim-ites as enemies. With this in mind, Shifrah and Puah are often treated as Yisrael-ites themselves ("Hebrews who are midwives"). Sometimes they are viewed as extraordinary Mitzrayim-ites who somehow do not behave as enemies.

Some teachers assume that the two groups don't live near one another or mix much at all -- a severe form of segregation, even apartheid. Some assume an opposite extreme: Yisrael-ites and Mitzrayim-ites living side-by-side as neighbors, even though they had different rights in the society. There are many ideas in between, as well. And the roles of Shifrah and Puah appear different

depending on assumptions about general living conditions under Pharaoh.

One very old thread in Jewish commentary hints at some kind of organized resistance movement. Exodus shows us people standing against Pharaoh. For example:

- midwives refuse to kill babies;
- Pharaoh's daughter rescues a baby (Exod 2:5), and
- Mitzrayim-ites give provisions for the journey (Exod 12:35-36).

These are individuals making their own choices. But Jewish teachers have long wondered what else was going on:

- Who else was involved in helping the boy babies survive?
- How many other Yisrael-ite families took a chance and trusted Mitzrayim-ites to have compassion on their babies?
- How many other Mitzrayim-ite families took that risk and adopted Yisrael-ite babies?
- What other kinds of interactions were going on between ordinary people watching the plagues and worrying that Pharaoh was destroying everyone? Were people turning on one another -- maybe reporting neighbors to the authorities? Were some finding like-minded people and taking steps to improve life for everyone?

Returning to Rabbi Gerry's teaching above (p.9), we can ask:

- What choices were people in Mitzrayim making, all along?
- Which choices supported liberation and which ones did not?
- What can we learn from the variety? Can the Exodus story inspire us to choices that support liberation?
- What kind of support would make those choices more possible?

## ***TORAH EXPLORATIONS: Change of Heart and Old Bones***

For the first 13 chapters of Exodus, getting out is the goal. The Torah portion "*Beshalach*" includes the big, triumphant escape and the Song of the Sea, sung by grateful people after they escape Pharaoh's army. This dramatic moment can fool us into thinking we're freer than we are. And all the drama might keep us from noticing some thought-provoking points in the text.

When Pharaoh sent the people out, God did not lead them [*v'lo-nacham*] by the coastal/Philistine route, although it was nearer, for God said: "The people may have a change of heart [*pen yinnachem*] when they see war, and return to Egypt." So God led the people roundabout, by wilderness route, at the Sea of Reeds and the children of Yisrael went up "*chamushim*"\* out of the land of *Mitzrayim*. And Moses took the bones of Joseph with him; for he laid an oath on the Children of *Yisrael*, saying: "God will surely remember you; and you shall carry up my bones away with you." -- Exod 13:17-19

**Change of Heart.** The People are sent on a roundabout route, to avoid a "change of heart." The verb translated as "change of heart" [*nachum*, נָחַם] also means "comfort."

One reading suggests that **comfort is the problem**. Seeking to avoid war seems like a sensible idea. But God chooses the roundabout way so that the people will not be tempted to choose comfort, for fear of conflict, and lose the chance at liberation.

Another reading is that **comfort is the solution**. God knows the people have already been through a lot: enslavement, plagues, leaving the only place they've ever known, fearing for their own and others' lives. So, God is choosing comfort, to keep them away from yet more trauma. They will still pursue liberation, but without more immediate conflict.

These readings contradict each other. So, we might ask: Well, which is it?!

- Is God criticizing the people for wanting comfort and avoiding conflict?
- Or is God trying to protect people who have seen too much conflict already?

Maybe both messages are there. Maybe change is always intertwined with both fear of conflict and need for comfort. Maybe the small, complicated bits are just as important as those big dramatic moments -- in Torah and in our own lives.

\* *Chamushim* is often listed as "meaning of the Hebrew uncertain." *Chamish* = five. So, this could be marching, as for battle, in fives or fifties. It might mean that only one in five left -- this is one source for the teaching mentioned on p.9. It can be translated as "armed," as with weapons. Sometimes, based on other parts of the Exodus story, it is understood as "armed" with wealth or supplies.

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**Old Bones.** Right after we learn that about the roundabout route, the Torah adds: "Moses took the bones of Joseph with him."

Taking Joseph's bones honors a vow from generations earlier (Gen 50:24-26 and Exod 1:8). This is one of the ways the Genesis tale is carried through into Exodus. It also raises some questions:

- What do communities owe leaders, or other community members, of the past?
- How does a community become obliged for any promise? Is there any time limit? What if conditions change?

We can also understand this symbolically: Taking the bones out represents a final separation of Joseph's family from the land of *Mitzrayim*. More positively, the bones represent a connection to the distant past, which could help the people work out their life ahead.

In any case: The journey is now longer, for fear of conflict. And the people are carrying old bones. If nothing else, the journey toward liberation seems to be getting more complicated.

**Who Are We?** One way to explore any bible story is to think of ourselves as characters in the text:

- In what ways are we like the midwives in Exodus 1, attempting to stand up to power and for life?
- Moses was raised in one household and culture but connects to another. How are we like Moses?
- When we meet Pharaoh in Exodus 1, he is impatient with the past and fearful of the future. He is trying to control people and events in order to protect what he values. How are we like Pharaoh?

There are more characters to explore. And some Jewish teachers think that we're all of them: a little like Pharaoh, a little like Moses, a little like Shifrah and Puah, and also like Zipporah and Aaron and Miriam and Jethro... at least some of the time. This opens new ways to think about Torah and about ourselves.

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**Rabbi Yael Levy's meditations, "For Healing and Love" and "Hineini, Here I Am,"** appear p.3-4.on Rabbi Yael is founder and rabbinic director of A Way In Jewish Mindfulness, offering "a way in" to spiritual practice and awareness using the language of Jewish tradition to address universal issues." She is retired from Mishkan Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation in Philadelphia and has worked with the Institute for Jewish Spirituality. Her book, *Directing the Heart: Weekly Mindfulness Teachings and Practices from the Torah* (Way In, Inc, 2019), can be found at Bookshop and other outlets. Contact: A Way In, P.O. Box 63912. Philadelphia, PA 19147-7779

**Rereading Exodus.** Some of the material shared this month is adapted from *Rereading Exodus Along the Anacostia: Some Lessons of Cross River Dialogue*, by Virginia Avniel Spatz. (Charnice Milton Community Bookstore, 2022). The book can be found at Bookshop and other outlets.



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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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