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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 -- Mar 2024/Adar-2 5784

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 postal mail: Matir Asurim, PO Box 18858. Philadelphia, PA 19119;
- by emailing matirasurimnetwork@gmail.com;
- or contact Divrei Matir Asurim's editor at ethreporter@gmail.com.

Practicing Springtime

Jewish springtime is a season of upheaval and liberation. Adar-2 brings us more deeply into the months of gathering joy amid struggle. Purim and Passover carry us through practices of masking and unmasking, experiencing narrowness and expanse, using up and clearing out last year's grain. Pausing to ask what we are practicing and why can help guide us through these months:

"The question 'What are you practicing?' always brings me back to myself, my values, my intentions, my commitments -- Am I practicing policing and punishment? Or am I practicing embodying and receiving love, with boundaries, for the sake of ancestral healing and bringing into being the world I long for?" -- Andrea J. Ritchie. *Practicing New Worlds: Abolition and Emergent Strategies*. (AK Press, 2024), p.242

May the season bring upheaval where needed and liberation to all.

Matir Asurim Organizational News

Organizers' Meeting

Matir Asurim organizers' meetings are now on a quarterly schedule, with working groups meeting more often as needed. More news after our **NEXT MEETING**: March 17.

Continuing Query: Food Service/Kashrut: Thank you to those who already offered feedback on kosher and ritual food access. If you have not yet done so, please do -- see below

Continuing Query: Food Service/Kashrut

Thank you to those who already offered feedback on kosher and ritual food access.

If you have not yet done so, please do!!

Matir Asurim is gathering information about existing conditions and laws around kosher food service. If you have We are a small number of volunteers, spread out across the U.S. and Canada, and we know we cannot address every need. But we do want to hear from Jews inside, and from visitors who use commissary and vending machines:

Do you have access to kosher food?

Is it comparable to meals provided to those not on religious diet?

Are special foods for Shabbat and holidays available?

Will you have access to customary sweets for the festival of Purim (March 23-24 this year)?

Are accommodations made for the days of Passover (April 22-30)?

Will you have access to ritual foods for seder?

Anything else you'd like to share with us about your experience with kosher and ritual foods?

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

Submit items for future editions (use contacts above, page 1). Categories include:

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

Recent Execution Loss:

February 28: **Ivan Cantu**, Texas

Special Execution Concern:

Thomas Creech was scheduled for execution on February 28 in Idaho. Lethal injections failed, and the death warrant expired. Future now uncertain.

Executions Scheduled:

March 20: **Willie James Pye**, Georgia

April 4: **Michael Smith**, Oklahoma

April 9: **Brian Dorsey**, Missouri

Memorial:

March 31 **Bella Abzug** (1920-1998): US Congresswoman, eco-feminist, civil rights activist

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.

Calendar Notes: Adar-2, Purim, Passover, and Special Shabbatot

Jewish leap years, like this one, have 13 months, instead of 12. So, we have an extra month of Adar. Adar 1 began on February 8-10, and Adar 2 begins on March 9-11.

Purim begins after Shabbat on March 23 this year, and Passover runs April 22 through April 29 or 30.

The calendar includes five special Shabbats (Hebrew plural: *Shabbatot*) in the lead-up to Passover.

Shabbat Shekalim once concerned the annual half-shekel/adult contribution to the Temple. Since destruction of the Temple, Jews traditionally make a tzedakah contribution at Purim. Extra readings are Ex 30:11-16 (census) and 2 Kings 12:1-17 or 11:17 - 12:17 (donations to support the Temple).

Shabbat Zachor [memory] right before Purim, includes readings about Amalek, Deut 25:17-19 and 1 Sam 15:1 or 2-34. Amalek relates to the Book of Esther and many other ideas about Jews' enemies.

Shabbat Parah [cow] adds Numbers 19:1-22, a reading on the Red Heifer Temple purification ritual.

Shabbat HaChodesh [month], adds Exod 12:1-20, on the new month and sacrifice of Passover

Shabbat HaGadol [big], adds Malachi 3:4-24; right before Passover, this Shabbat used to be one of two in which a rabbi would give a "big" sermon to help communities prepare for important holidays.

Passover: The Shabbat during Passover adds a reading of *Shir HaShirim*, the Song of Songs

Schedule of Exodus/*Shemot* and Leviticus/*Vayikra* Torah Reading

<i>Hebrew title</i> [English]. Chapters: verse	Civic date. Hebrew date for Shabbat portion is read	Special PASSOVER-RELATED Shabbats
Ki Tisa [When you elevate]. Ex 30:11-34:35.	March 2. 22 Adar I	
Vayakhel [He assembled]. Ex 35:1-38:20.	March 9. 29 Adar I	SHABBAT SHEKALIM
Pekudei ["Accounts of"]. Ex 38:21-40:38	March 16. 6 Adar 2	[End of Exodus]
Vayikra [He called]. <i>Vayikra</i> /Lev 1:1 - 5:26	March 23. 13 Adar 2	SHABBAT ZACHOR
Tzav [Command]. Lev 6:1 - 8:36	March 30. 20 Adar 2	SHABBAT PARAH
Shmeni [Eighth]. Lev 9:1 - 11:47	April 6. 27 Adar 2	SHABBAT HaCHODESH
Tazria [She bears seed]. Lev 12:1 - 13:59	April 13. 5 Nisan	
Metzora [Infected one] Lev 14:1 - 15:33	April 20. 12 Nisan	SHABBAT HaGADOL
Passover Day 5. Exodus 33:12 - 34:26	April 27. 19 Nisan	SHABBAT PESACH
Acharei Mot [after the death]. Lev 16:1 - 18:30	May 4. 26 Nisan	
Kedoshim [Holy] Lev 19:1 - 20:27	May 11. 3 Iyar	
Emor [Say] Lev 21:1-24:23	May 18. 10 Iyar	
Behar [On the mountain] Lev 25:1-26:2	May 25. 17 Iyar	
Bechukotai [In my laws] Lev 26:3 - 27:34	Jun 1. 24 Iyar	[End of Leviticus/ <i>Vayikra</i>]

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

Divrei Matir Asurim, March 2024, Adar-2 5784, p.4

TORAH EXPLORATIONS

Closing Exodus

Exodus ends with a focus on the *Mishkan*, the portable worship space carried through the wilderness. The final weekly portions contain details, drama, and more details.

Details. We get instructions for constructing the *Mishkan*. We get details about the priests' robes, designs in the curtains, and oil for the lamps. We are told about types of woods and colors of yarns that should be used. The directions are interrupted by the Golden Calf incident (Ex 32, see also p.6).

Drama. This story begins when Moses is on Mount Sinai and seems gone too long. The people are fearful and lose faith in Moses. They ask Aaron to help them create an idol they can follow instead. They melt gold to create a statue of a calf and then worship the Golden Calf instead of God. God is furious and threatens to end all relationship with the people. Moses destroys the first Tablets of the "Decalogue," the Ten Commandments or Words just revealed on Mount Sinai. Thousands are killed in violence meant to destroy those responsible for the Golden Calf....but eventually, God and Moses together create a second set of tablets, and we get yet more details.

Details. We get detailed description of how the tabernacle is constructed. Woods, and yarn, and curtain designs, and oil for the lamps -- as it is all crafted and put into place by the artists and the people. Moses completes the work. God's *kavod* [presence] fills the *mishkan*. [The Book of Exodus ends.]

Directions vs. Disaster. The Golden Calf incident illustrates sharp conflict between God, the people, and their leaders. When Moses is on Mount Sinai, there is a lack of communication with the people and Aaron below. This leads to death and destruction. Some teachers see the *Mishkan* sections as a kind of antidote, or a way of preventing more disaster. The exact directions are meant to keep things from going off the rails. But the *Mishkan* sections are full of tension, too.

Communal Responsibility. God tells Moses "Let them make Me a sanctuary [*mikdash*], that I may dwell among them" (Ex 25:8). The Hebrew verb "dwell" is related to "*Mishkan*." The idea seems to be that the people's collective creation of a worship space is necessary for God to "dwell among them." Later, the people are responsible for keeping a lamp burning -- "forever, through the generations" (Ex 27:21). These are not things anyone, or even any one generation, can do alone.

At the same time, construction materials are supposed to come only from "those with a willing heart" (Ex 25:2, 35:5). And the work is to be done by "every wise-hearted person." So, individual intentions and abilities do matter.

Improvising. God provides a detailed list of accepted contributions (Exodus 25, 35) and exact uses. But the people bring their own contributions for the work -- so much, that Moses finally tells them to stop (Ex 36:5-7). Then a group of women bring mirrors (Ex 38:8), so the chief artist uses them to create a wash basin -- which was not in the original instructions.

Even with detailed directions, there is still tension between divine and human intentions and between individual and collective responsibility.

Exodus ends in this tension.

Beyond Exodus: New Challenges

Leviticus raises a whole new set of challenges.

The *Mishkan* may be finished, and relatively stable. But, surrounding the *Mishkan* are people. People have bodies, and bodies change:

- grow and decay,
- sweat and bleed,
- engage in sex acts and give birth,
- fall ill, heal, die.

Human bodies eat and relate to the land and to plants and animals around them.

How does all that change relate to God?

 NOTE: Leviticus – “*Vayikra*” in Hebrew – is a difficult book for many. There are many reasons for this, including the fact that some passages have been used -- in- and outside of Judaism -- to great harm. Learning from the text does not mean ignoring harm, or trying to erase it. Learning about the book's history, philosophy, and interpretations over the centuries can help us find meaning in Leviticus.

Change, "Ick," and God-People Relationships. Leviticus is full of sacrifice, blood, and body parts -- with plenty of "icky" detail. Those details are part of life's messiness, how bodies change. Rabbi Tamar Kamionkowski teaches that Leviticus deals with relationships between that messiness and ideas of divinity.

Over the centuries, Judaism has developed many different ways of understanding how God and people relate. At least two different ancient theologies are found in the Book of Leviticus.

--- P theology, for "**priestly**," is found throughout the Torah and linked to the first 16 chapters of Leviticus -- focus is on ritual purity;

--- H theology, for "**holiness**," is linked to chapters 17-26 of Leviticus -- focus is on what modern readers call "morality."

Two theories of God's relationship to change. Rabbi Kamionkowski describes the two theologies in her introduction to Leviticus. She teaches that the two systems address different questions, and keeping the ideas apart can help avoid confusion.

P's God is separate from humanity, a force-like "Other." P's God does not get angry or jealous, as in Exodus (see Golden Calf story, for example):

"P's theology imagines a God of stability and perfection, which naturally results in a tension between God's static nature and humanity's constantly changing nature. P believes that placing some controls on the changing nature of human bodies can bring humanity closer to God."

"P offers compelling views of community and the careful balance between the needs of individuals and the needs of the community. P emphasizes that the private seeps into the public and that an great community." -- p.lxii, p. lxiii, *Leviticus**

H's theology looks at God and the people in a partner relationship, influencing one another

"H is centered in holiness as relationship between God and [the people] Israel, with both partners able to impact the other profoundly....both partners are vulnerable and interdependent. God is not Other...." p.lxi*

For P, ritual purity is important to keep God's presence [*kavod*] dwelling among the people. For H, holiness is found in God, people, places and things. God's presence [*kavod*] is not in question for H, according to Rabbi Kamionkowski. Instead, God's "name [*shem*]" is influenced by what we do: humans can desecrate God's name through unethical behavior.

Rabbi Kamionkowski stresses that H's theology is not describing an equal partnership between people and God -- God is still God. But the focus is less priestly and more on the people as a whole.

What did I miss?

Opening Leviticus at the beginning can seem like starting a book or movie half-way through. The text seems to assume the reader knows the basics of the sacrificial systems already and just needs details of particular offerings.

One way to approach these opening chapters is to consider a very distant overview:

- **Vayikra** explains how to set things right after an inadvertent mistake. One of those sins is breaking trust.
- **Tzav** describes some rituals that are meant to be "everlasting."
- **Shmini** outlines rules relating to food and contact with animals, to maintain purity.

What kinds of situations are involved here? What are we learning about what affects purity? Is there any aspect of life that is not of concern?

As the Book of Exodus comes to a close, a meditation on the Torah portion, *Ki Tisa*, the portion containing the Golden Calf story (Ex 32), see p. 4 here. At this point in the story, Moshe (Moses) has disappeared into the cloud atop Mount Sinai, and the people are afraid he will not return....

Don't Follow the Fear

In their panic

They fashioned for themselves a god.
Out of gold, silver and precious stones
They made something they could see and touch
Something they could hold onto.
From their own hands
They made a god that was static, immovable
A god that was definite
And would never change.

In the throes of fear,
Our ancestors grasped for certainty
They turned away from mystery
And the presence of the unknown.

And when Moshe returned to camp,
Carrying the tablets
Inscribed by the Divine Presence
There was a shattering.

The tablets,
 containing the light of the Infinite Mystery,
Could not enter a place where
Certainty was worshipped
And fear ruled.

As fragments of the broken tablets
 spread through out the camp
The people mourned and wailed.

But from within the brokenness,

 The Mystery called:
Hinei makom iti—
 There is a place for you with me. (Ex 33:21)

In the midst of fear,
In the grip of doubt and mistrust,
Amid the shattering and dread,
Even here,
There is a place for you with me.

Feel my presence.
I am standing right beside you.
Listen as I call out my name:

All Being, All Being,
Compassion and Graciousness,
Patience, Forbearance,
Abounding in Love and Truth,
Extending Generosity through time and space,
Lifting up Guilt and Despair
from the Depths of Misdeeds,
And making you free. (Ex 34: 5-7)

The Torah urges us to keep watch,
So as not to be hijacked by doubts and fears,
No matter how loud and insistent they become.
And not to let regrets and misdeeds
Shatter hope and possibility.

Listen, the Mystery calls:
There is a place for you with me.
I am standing right beside you.
And this is my name:

Compassion, Graciousness, Patience,
Love, Truth, Generosity,
Forgiveness.
May these calls give us strength to face the brokenness we encounter
and join together for healing.
-- Rabbi Yael Levy, shared with permission

Yael Levy is founder and rabbinic director of A Way In, offering “a way in” to spiritual practice and awareness that uses the language of Jewish tradition and address universal issues. She is retired from a part-time position at Mishkan Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation in Philadelphia, and has worked with the Institute for Jewish Spirituality. She is an author and provides a mindfulness guide to the Torah portions of the week. Contact: A Way In, P.O. Box 63912. Philadelphia, PA 19147-7779

TORAH EXPLORATIONS: *Purim and Passover*

Resources for Purim and Passover are available at MatirAsurim.org.

An outside contact can download the material for sharing in print or copying into emails

-- or use the contacts on page 1 to request a copy.

Purim: These notes on Purim, Costumes, and Masks are part of the Purim 5782 Resources.

The Holiday, by Allen Lipson

Purim is a holiday celebrating the events of the biblical book of Esther. The book takes place during the Jews' exile from Israel, at a time when they're at the mercy of the massive Persian Empire.

Ahashverosh, the king of Persia, rejects his queen for publicly refusing to obey his orders, and holds a national beauty contest for a new queen. The winner, Esther, is a Jew, but hides her religion from the king under advice from her uncle and foster father Mordechai. The Jews confront grave danger when Mordechai refuses to bow to Haman, the king's top official. Haman, outraged at the insult, convinces Achashverosh to massacre the entire Jewish people as a threat to the empire. He rolls dice (*purim* in Hebrew) to set a date for the attack. A frantic Mordechai passes a secret message to Esther, pleading with her to take up the Jews' cause with her husband the king: "Who knows – maybe you have become royalty for this very moment?" At the risk of her life, Esther reveals her Jewish identity to the king, who furiously sentences Haman to death and grants the Jews permission to defend themselves. Mordechai, newly appointed as the king's assistant, establishes a new holiday named Purim in celebration.

Three mitzvot, commandments, are traditionally linked to Purim:

- 1) *matanot l'evyonim*, gifts to the poor;
- 2) *mishloah manot*, gifts to friends; and
- 3) the public reading of the *megilat Esther*, the scroll of the Purim story.

Dressing up in costumes on Purim to show public joy has also become a general custom. Rabbinic tradition encourages us to think about gifts not just in terms of physical presents but as gestures, favors, or kind words.

Reflections

Though we usually think of Purim as lighthearted, the story shows a dark vision of the world when we look closely. The Jews are politically power-less, at the mercy of a leader who doesn't seem to know or care whether they deserve to live. As the rabbis point out in their commentary, Esther herself is forced into marrying the king. Yes, the Jews come out on top at the end – but who knows when another wicked government official may come along and start the story all over again?

The world of Purim is our world, a world in which our basic physical and political needs are out of our control, where God is hard to find (God's name famously never appears in the entire book of Esther), and where even victories are only temporary. What, then, should we do?

Two rabbis facing brutal conditions tried to answer. The Hasidic teacher Rebbe Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev, writing as the oppressive Russian Empire swallowed up his city, argues that all of the central mitzvot of Purim – giving gifts to the poor, gifts to friends, and remembering our story – are acts that human beings, not God, need to step into. Our choices shape God's will. When we behave with compassion, we "awake" God; God mirrors compassion back toward us.

Rebbe Kalonymus Kalmish Shapiro, speaking to his community in the Warsaw Ghetto just before his murder in the Holocaust, says that the essence of Purim is not making oneself happy, which can sometimes be impossible, but in trying to be happy in the ways one can. It's the effort to feel, not only the feeling, that really matters.

Questions

-- Purim is a story about power and the lack of it. Who has power in this story and who doesn't? Do you relate to any of the characters in the ways they use or refuse to use their power?

-- God's name doesn't appear in the book of Esther. Do you think God plays a role "behind the scenes" of this story? What role do you think God plays in your life today?

-- Does the rabbis' advice of "awakening from below" – acting out of love to shape a universe of love – speak to you? What about Rebbe Kalonymus Kalmish Shapiro's suggestion to try to be happy in spite of the obstacles? Is this helpful? Is it possible?

Ritual Suggestions

The mitzvah of *mishloach manot*, sending gifts to one's friends, can be fulfilled by two friends passing the same object back and forth between each other. What gifts do you have to give – whether food or kind words? What can you exchange?

Costumes & Masks on Purim: A Text Study by Laynie Solomon

In many Jewish communities, dressing in a costume or wearing masks has become a popular custom on Purim. Despite not being a mitzvah, a commanded practice, it's one of the most widespread practices associated with Purim. Below are traditional Jewish texts that explore some aspect of wearing masks, and how the practice of wearing an external mask or costume can affect our internal lives, and our relationships with God.

Background:

The holiday of Purim was a later rabbinic holiday (like Hanukkah), as opposed to an earlier biblical holiday (like Yom Kippur or Passover). The story of Purim as it's described in the Megillah – the scroll on which the Purim story is read – makes no mention of costumes or masks or dressing up as practice for observing Purim. The custom of dressing up is actually from German Jewish communities in the 15th century, and no one really knows how it started.

Spiritual Power of Masks & Costumes

Questions to think about:

- What does each of these teachers think we should wear on Purim?
- Why do they think we should dress up on Purim?
- Why do **you** think we should dress up on Purim (or not!)?
- What is spiritually meaningful about costumes? (For these authors, or for you!)

I. Ben Ish Chai, Year 1: Tetzaveh, Laws of Purim

The Ben Ish Chai is a rabbi and community leader who lived in Baghdad, Iraq in the 1800s.

"On Purim a community should wear Shabbat clothes or other clothes that are important, and they should not wear regular everyday clothing. On Purim we pray the verse from Psalms: 'This is the day G!d has made, We will rejoice and be glad in it'" (Ps. 118:24).

II. Ba'al Shem Tov

The Ba'al Shem Tov is a Hassidic Master, the founder of a mystical Jewish movement in the 1700s in Ukraine.

"It is a mitzvah to obey and to dress up on Purim. Indeed, it is a great mitzvah, because in this way one cannot tell the nobleman from the poor. And therefore the rabbis instituted one of the main *mitzvot* of Purim, which is giving financial gifts to people in poverty. When people dress up, the *mitzvah* of *tzedakah* (of financial redistribution) can be fulfilled in the ideal way. The ideal way to give money is when the giver does not know who they are giving to, and the receiver does not know who they received from. When we wear costumes, we are able to avoid recognizing each other. Therefore, this is the best manner of anonymous giving: when one gives while in costume to someone else in costume."

III. Norman Cohen

This is an excerpt from a book by Norman Cohen from a book that he wrote in 2012, *Masking and Unmasking Ourselves: Interpreting Biblical Texts on Clothing & Identity*.

"Purim invites us to set aside a time in which we completely reverse our wardrobe, which in turn reverses our identity. It is an invitation to...cross

and reverse all the other dichotomies and uniforms of our lives as well. On Purim we are using clothes against themselves, to deny their power to box us in, and simultaneously to redeem us from needing redemption...

"Purim makes us wonder if there is an 'authentic self' at all, or whether it is all just endless masks upon masks.

"...we may ask what lies beneath a story that intimates the absence of God and meaning, and the holiday of Purim, which is about frivolity and play. Underneath the garment of the story is perhaps a glimpse of the existence of a force in the universe that can help us move beyond who we are and what our lives presently are, and enable us to become who we aspire to be."

Passover: Matir Asurim resources for Passover include two versions of the *Haggadah*, a guidebook for the seder and thoughts to help prepare for the holiday.

As noted in the 5783 Matir Asurim edition:

"The *Hagaddah* is designed to provoke questions, to get us to think in new ways, to lure us into the stories through song and collective ritual. Although preparing traditional foods and gathering with others can be a helpful way to ground yourself in the spiritual meanings of the holiday, you can still celebrate Pesach if you are alone and/or have limited control over the food available to you."

Here are two selections for advance preparation.

Faith, Fear, and the Story of Nachshon and the Red Sea

by Stacey Zisook Robinson, z"l ---- This piece appeared in Matir Asurim's 5783 *Haggadah*.

The story of Nachshon is my favorite midrash. Nachshon was a slave with all the other Israelites who found redemption at the hand of God. He was Let Go, with a capital L and a capital G, brought out with a Mighty Hand. He packed and didn't let the dough rise and ran, breathless and scared and grateful, away from the land of Pharaohs and pyramids and slavery. Nachshon ran into freedom.

And then he got to the sea. He and some 600,000 other un-slaved people, stopped cold by the Red Sea. It was huge and liquid and deep. They couldn't see the other side. It was so big they couldn't see any sides. Just wetness from here to forever.

And behind him, when he and the 600,000 others dared to peek, were Pharaoh and his army of men and horses and chariots, carrying spears and swords and assorted sharp, pointy things. Even at a distance, the sharp, pointy things loomed quite large in the eyes of Nachshon and his recently freed landsmen. They were caught between the original rock and a hard place—or, I guess, between water and sharp, pointy

things. At that point, I don't think anyone involved cared much about getting the metaphor exactly right; what they cared about was getting out from that perilous middle—and fast.

Moses went to have a chat with God, and just like that, he got an answer—a Divine Instant Message. All the Children of Israel needed to do was walk forward into the sea, that big, wet, deep forever sea. God would provide a way. “Trust Me,” God seemed to say, “I got you this far, didn't I? I wouldn't let you fall now!”

Nachshon and the 600,000 stood at the shivery edge of that sea, staring at that infinite horizon in front and the pointy, roiling chaos of death and slavery behind them. They stood, planted—and let's face it: not just planted, but rooted in their fear and mistrust and doubt. They may have felt reassured by the image of God as a pillar of smoke or fire—impressive pyrotechnics, to be sure—but the soldiers and the sea were so there, present and much more real.

Then, in the midst of that fear and doubt, something changed. Nachshon— recently freed, trapped between death by water and death by bleeding—did the miraculous. He put one foot in front of the other and walked into the sea. The 600,000 held their collective breath, watching the scene unfold before them as Nachshon did what they could not: He decided to have faith. And though the water covered first his ankles, then his knees, then his chest, then kept rising, until he was almost swallowed whole, Nachshon kept walking, kept believing. And just when it seemed that he was a fool for his faith, that he would surely drown in that infinite sea, another miracle: The waters parted.

The sea split and Nachshon, so recently in over his head, walked on dry land. The 600,000 breathed again, in one relieved whoosh of air, and they found their own faith and followed Nachshon into the dry sea to across to the other side. And then the journey truly began.

I pray to have faith enough to walk into my own sea—of doubt and fear and darkness. I want to walk and feel the waters part, to be released from the tangled web of thought that holds me immobile and disconnected. I have learned, again and again, without fail: When I take that step, when I find the faith to put one foot in front of the other and to trust, as Nachshon did, I am carried forward. I am freed from my self-imposed bondage. I am enough, and I can walk again on dry land to freedom.

Stacey Zisook Robinson, z"l, was a member of Congregation Hakafa in Glencoe, IL, and author of poems and essays. She died on March 8, 2021.

Our Power by Rena Banson ---- This piece appeared in Matir Asurim's 5782 *Haggadah*.

In the Torah, when the Red Sea parts for the Israelites to cross and escape from Pharaoh's army, they sing a song in celebration: *Shirat Hayam* – the Song of the Sea. It's written that all the Israelites sang together, and the ancient rabbis imagined that infants sang along too; one sage, Rebbe Meir, said that even unborn babies joined in. In this moment, the Israelites were not only celebrating God's power; they were also lifting up their collective power, reclaiming their own voices in song, and every single voice mattered.

This is part of the narrative of our collective past, and it is also a prayer for our collective future. A future where everyone is free, and where every voice can ring out in its fullness and be heard. May *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*, the Holy Blessed One, give us strength to keep working together to build this world.

Here is a song I wrote called “Our Power,” which includes a line from Hebrew liturgy referring to the Song of the Sea, along with new English lyrics:

We will not underestimate our power any longer –
We know that together, we are strong.
Like drops of water shape the rocks
As they rush down the falls,

We know that together, we are strong.

Shira chadasha shibchu ge'ulim l'shimcha al sfat hayam, yachad kulam hodu

Translation: "Liberated people sang a new song, praising Your name on the lip of the sea. Together, everyone gave thanks..." (from the *Mi Chamocha* blessing after the *Shema*)

~ ~ ~

Even though there are walls keeping us apart, I feel connected to you as you read these words. Thank you for being part of this web of Jewish community, as well as part of the bigger tapestry of creation. As an individual, you offer something specific and holy to this picture that no one else can. We all need each other. This Passover, I honor and celebrate our collective power. May we use it for the greatest healing good. L'chaim – to life!

***Acheinu* (“Our kindred”) — for those facing anguish and captivity**

"*Acheinu*" is a 1000-year-old prayer for captives. Some traditions use it during weekday morning prayers, when the Torah is returned to the ark after reading. This spot in the service is understood as a moment of unity for those gathered in prayer with Jews everywhere -- in freedom or in captivity.

This version includes a wider sense of kindred. It changes "from darkness to light" to "from isolation to support." And the final request for "redemption" is changed to a prayer for "peace and wholeness," in recognition that many among us do not expect immediate release.

*Acheinu kol beit yisrael,
v'acheinu kol yoshvei tevel*

For all our family of the House of Israel,
and all our family across the Earth,

*ha-n'tunim b'tzarah u-vashivyah,
ha-omdim bein ba-yam u-vein ba-yabashah,*

who are given into trouble and captivity,
whether on sea or on land:

*ha-makom y'raheim aleihem,
v'yotzi'eim mi-tzarah lirvaḥah,
mi-bidud l'temichah
u'mi-shabud l'shalom
hashta ba'agala uvizman kariv.
Ve'imru Amen.*

May the Divine have compassion upon them,
and bring them from distress to relief,
from isolation to support,
from subjugation to peace and wholeness,
now, speedily, soon,
and let us say: Amen.

-- adaptation, Virginia Avniel Spatz
for Matir Asurim, Adar 2 5784 (March 2024). Share with attribution.

Hashkiveinu

Shelter from the River to the Sea

*Hashkiveinu adonai eloheinu l'shalom
ve'ha'amideinu malkeinu l'chayim...*

May you lie down in peace
and rise up again to life
in the morning.

*Ve'hagen ba'adeinu ve'haser mei'aleinu
oyev, dever, ve'cherev, ve'ra'av ve'ya'gon...*

May you be protected
from all violence and harm,
hunger and disease,
sheltered from weapons of death
that strike from above and below.

Uve'tzel kanfecha tastireinu...

May you be healed from all pain and trauma,
comforted by the knowledge
that you are not alone.

Ufros aleinu sukkat shlomecha...

May you find refuge
beneath a shelter that knows no bounds,
that you, and all who dwell
between the river and the sea
may find protection
for life and for peace
now and always.

Amen

-- Rabbi Brant Rosen, January 21, 2024

Brant Rosen is rabbi of Tzedek Chicago, long-time activist for peace and justice, and author of essays, poems, and Jewish liturgy. This piece is one of several written in as part of "Jewish Prayers for Gaza."

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The Book of Leviticus begins with the word, "Vayikra," written with a small letter *alef* at the end of the word --

וַיִּקְרָא אֶל-מֹשֶׁה

Jews have been discussing that little *alef* for centuries, coming up with moral lessons, mystical teachings, and long stories about Moses and God. For most, Hebrew spelling is key: With the *alef*, the word – *vayikra* [וַיִּקְרָא], *vav-yud-kuf-reish-alef* -- means "and he called." (It is clear from the rest of the verse that God-YHVH is calling to Moses before beginning to speak in the *Mishkan*.) Without the *alef*, the word -- *vayikar* [וַיִּקַּר], *vav-yud-kuf-reish* -- means "and he met, happened upon."

The overlapping meanings, of calling and meeting, are used for many teachings ---

--- God calls out to indicate that communication is welcome. From this we learn: when meeting someone on the way, it is not polite to start speaking without an invitation.

--- "Calling out" is more intimate than "happening on." But Moses wrote the *alef* small to avoid bragging about his close relationship with God. From this we learn the importance of humility.

--- "Calling out" shows God making room for Moses, so they could truly "meet." From this we learn to imitate God by making room for another person's thoughts and emotions.

--- The double meaning, right at the beginning of a whole Torah book about holiness, shows that holiness can be found in true meeting and communication.

May the Book of Leviticus, difficult as it can be, bring moments of communication and connection.

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).

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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. Please consider sharing your own and providing your feedback.