



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 -- May 2024/Iyar 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.

Matir Asurim Organizational News

Organizers' Meeting

We are now meeting once every six weeks. The next meeting is scheduled for May 12.

Working Groups

Resource Group is preparing a "Judaism 101" package for mailing soon. Penpal Group continues to match and support writing pairs. Finance group reports that last year's funds are sufficient now for mailings and other regular work, but MA will soon need additional fund-raising; the working group is considering grant applications as well.

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

Submit items for future editions (use contacts above). Possible categories:

- share concerns for healing of all kinds,
- recall teachers and loved ones whom death has taken from us, and
- mark milestones and celebrations.

Recent Execution Loss:

April 4: **Michael Smith**, Oklahoma

April 9: **Brian Dorsey**, Missouri

Executions Scheduled:

May 30 : **Jamie R. Mills**, Alabama

June 6: **Wade Lay**, Oklahoma

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

The month of Iyar (or Iyyar) begins May 7-9.

The period of "the Omer," connecting Passover to the festival of Shavuot, began on April 24.

Weeks (and Days) of the Omer:

Week 1) April 24 - 30 (Days 1-7).

Week 2) May 1 - May 7 (Days 8-14)

Week 3) May 8 - May 14 (Days 15 - 21)

Week 4) May 15 - 21 (Days 22 - 28)

Week 5) May 22 - 28 (Days 29 - 35)

Week 6) May 29 - Jun 4 (Days 36 - 42)

Week 7) Jun 5 - June 11 (Days 43-49)

Shavuot June 11-12

Pesach Sheni -- Second Passover (alternative sacrifice date, per Number 9:10-14). Iyar 14. May 21-22.

Lag B'omer -- 33rd day of the Omer count (mood shift for the period). Iyar 18. May 25-26.

On the Omer:

One practice for the period of the Omer is to recite Psalm 67 -- more on this below, page 7. Another is praying for liberation of captives.

Prayer for Captives

In remembrance of the Exodus from *Mitzrayim*, we pray that You release all whose bodies and spirits remain captive and enable us to extend Your outstretched arm in the process of liberation.

Schedule of Leviticus/Vayikra Torah Reading

Hebrew title [English]. Chapters: verse	Civic date. Hebrew date for Shabbat portion is read
Vayikra [He called]. <i>Vayikra</i> /Lev 1:1 - 5:26	March 23. 13 Adar 2
Tzav [Command]. Lev 6:1 - 8:36	March 30. 20 Adar 2
Shmeni [Eighth]. Lev 9:1 - 11:47	April 6. 27 Adar 2
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
Passover Day 5. Exodus 33:12 - 34:26	April 27. 19 Nisan
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/Vayikra]

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

Some Torah Explorations relate to holiday readings or other seasonal themes.

TORAH EXPLORATIONS: Some Key Verses and Questions

Leviticus, or *Vayikra*, is the middle of the Torah's five books. It contains a lot of physicality: Blood. Bodily discharges. Diseases of human skin and of building materials. Forbidden sexual partners. Priestly rituals. Much of the discussion is about "purity" and what belongs outside the camp. Finding lessons for today can be challenging. But Leviticus also contains some of the most well-known Torah verses, central to Jewish thought. (See Torah Explorations in Adar-2 *Divrei Matir Asurim* for notes on this book.)

Key verses are found in the Torah portion called "*Kedoshim* [holy]," Lev 19:1 - 20:27. Here are a few of those and some questions they raise.

Redistribution of Wealth

Lev. 19:9-10 suggest models for economic justice:

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges [corners] of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not pick your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger: I YHVH am your God. -- JPS 2006 translation

A landowner must leave "corners" of a field and fallen vineyard fruit for those in need. This is not a gift or act of charity. It's more like a tax:

It's a legally required redistribution of wealth from haves to have-nots...

-- Maurice D. Harris. *Leviticus: You have No Idea* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013), p.79

These basic principles also apply more generally: Recognize what you have, and consider what others need. Don't be greedy.

The practice of leaving "gleanings" to the most vulnerable in society is an important part of the Book of Ruth. Ruth's story is read at the festival of Shavuot -- coming up next month.

Meanwhile ----

--- Are there people in the world around us who honor the spirit of these laws, by helping to share wealth -- in its many forms -- more fairly?

--- Where is society failing in this, allowing those who already have the most to pick every last grain and fruit?

--- Are there any "corners" or fruits in our control that we might leave to others more in need?

Fairness and Decency

Lev. 19:11-15 tells us more about behaving honorably toward others:

11) You shall not steal; you shall not deal deceitfully or falsely with one another.

12) You shall not swear falsely by My name, profaning the name of your God: I am YHVH.

13) You shall not oppress [or defraud] your neighbor. You shall not commit robbery. The wages of a laborer shall not remain with you until morning.

14) You shall not insult the deaf, or place a stumbling block before the blind. You shall fear your God: I am YHVH.

15) You shall not render an unfair decision: do not favor the poor or show deference to the rich; judge your kin fairly. -- JPS 2006 translation

In addition to laws against theft and lying, these verses insist on dignity for everyone and not taking advantage of others. This includes, for example, an obligation to speak up if we think someone is "blind" to a bad business deal or if someone is "deaf" to ways they are being insulted.

This section also warns against disrespecting God's name and calls for fearing/awing God.

The cases in which fear of God is invoked are laws that cannot necessarily be enforced and that have to do with just being a good person.

-- S. Tamar Kamionkowsi. *Leviticus*. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2018), p.207

--- How would serious attention to these commandments change the world around us?

(cont.)

Torah Explorations: Some Key Verses and Questions (cont.)

Speech, Conflict, Intention

The next three verses focus on words and thought, as well as action.

Verse 16 begins with **slander or tale-bearing**:

16) Do not traffic in slander [*rachil*] among your kinspeople. You are not to stand by the blood of your neighbor; I am YHWH!

-- Schocken (Fox) translation, 1995

The Hebrew word "*rachil*" in verse 16 is often translated as "tale-bearer." It can refer to trade or being a merchant, as well as slander:

Someone who acts like a merchant is someone who benefits by collecting and sharing information about other people....The power and potential misuse of speech is an important motif in biblical literature. -- Kamionkowski, p.208

The 12th Century teacher Ibn Ezra links the idea of tale-bearing to the second part of the verse, saying that people have been killed because of slander.

Other readings of "do not stand idly by..." include

- failing to act when a neighbor's life is in immediate danger or when dangerous conditions threaten them;
- "standing on" or "rising up against" a neighbor's blood (life), as in murder;
- making a living in a way that endangers others or threatens their well-being.

--- Is gossip a kind of "currency" being "traded" in the world around us?

--- Do you see ways in which tale-bearing endangers people?

--- What are some ways society regularly "stands idly by the blood of our neighbors?"

--- Is there any ways our own behavior can help protect others?

Verse 17 shifts to **feelings and conflict**:

17) You are not to hate your brother in your heart; rebuke, yes, rebuke your fellow, that you not bear sin because of him!

-- Schocken (Fox) translation, 1995

"Rebuke" -- "*tokhecha*," in Hebrew -- is an important concept in Judaism. Bringing harm out into the open can give the person who caused harm a chance to repair things. Telling someone that they hurt us or another is not easy. Doing so in a way that they can accept is even harder. But this verse warns that not rebuking someone can stir up more trouble, leading us to behave badly as a result of "hating them in the heart."

--- In your experience, does one person's "hating in the heart" lead to another person's "sin"? Are there ways to prevent this?

--- Has anyone ever rebuked you in a way that helped sort out a conflict, repair harm?

--- Have you ever succeeded in rebuking someone else in a way that led to healthful changes?

--- Do systems around us, and patterns in our own behavior, contribute to "hating in the heart"? Are there any aspects of these situations that we can change, with or without rebuke?

Verse 18 continues to link **intention and action**:

18) You are not to take-vengeance, you are not to retain-anger against the sons of your kinspeople — but be loving to your neighbor [as one] like yourself; I am YHWH!

-- Schocken (Fox) translation, 1995

Two teachers in the early 2nd Century CE disagreed about this verse: Rabbi Akiva taught that "Love your neighbor as yourself" is the "greatest principle in the Torah." Shimon ben Azzai believed that individuals too often do not love themselves; so loving another "like yourself" might mean treating them poorly.

Jewish teachers have continued to explore this disagreement for centuries and raised many other questions about the idea of loving your (cont.)

Torah Explorations: Some Key Verses and Questions (cont.)

(cont. from p. 4) neighbor as yourself, which is sometimes called "The Golden Rule."

Other questions Jews have asked:

- Does loving "as oneself" mean wishing another what **we** want, instead of what they need?
- Does loving a neighbor start with loving ourselves?
- Who, exactly, is "a neighbor"?

Holiness Teachings

The whole of Leviticus chapter 19 is part of what many Jewish teachers call "Holiness Code" or "Holiness Legislation." In fact, this chapter is part of the portion named "Holy [*Kedoshim*]," from its second verse:

"Speak to the whole Israelite community and say to them: You shall be holy, for I, your God YHVH am holy." -- Lev. 19:2 ,JPS translation

[OR]

"Holy are you to be,
for holy am I, YHVH your God!"
-- Lev. 19:2, Schocken (Fox) translation

To summarize some of what was shared previously (Adar-2 *Divrei Matir Asurim*) from Rabbi Kamionkowski's book, *Leviticus: The "H" chapters are Leviticus 19-26*. The focus in these chapters is on holiness, as it is found in God, people, places and things. God's presence [*kavod*] is not in question for H. 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. (Based on *Leviticus*, pages lxi-lxiii)

The importance of God's name -- and how human behavior can cause harm to the name -- appears in the verses quoted above, particularly in 19:12

Rabbi Kamionkowski concludes her introduction:

Leviticus teaches us to note the holy in everyday actions. What we eat from day to day matters. How we interact with others around us matters. Each moment provides the opportunity for a holy moment, for a shift toward God's holiness. -- Kamionkowski, p.lxiii

TORAH EXPLORATIONS: A Journey and a Second Chance

Passover is behind us, and the festival of Shavuot is still weeks ahead -- in the month of Sivan. This in-between period, called the "Omer," is understood in Jewish tradition as a part of a journey. (Lots more on this in the Nisan *Divrei Matir Asurim*.) Whether we've been marking the days and weeks -- since the Omer began on April 24 -- or not, we are on the way. In their book, *For Times Such as These*, Rabbi Ariana Katz and Rabbi Jessica Rosenberg ask us to consider what it means to be in this in-between moment:

Welcome to Iyar. What journey are you on at this moment in your life? Where are you coming from and where are you going? What small thing can you do every day to remind you of how far you have come and where you are going?

What [resources] bring you back to what's most important to you?...

On the "journey" from Pesach to Shavuot, our daily practice and weekly study invite us to reflect on what kind of people we want to be in the world: how we experience and manifest holiness, how we treat each other, how we live into liberation and live into Torah. What daily practice of noticing will you try on this year? -- *For Times Such as These*. (Wayne State, University Press 2024), p.229

Torah Explorations: A Journey and a Second Chance (cont.)

For those of us in physical and/or psychological places we'd rather not be, reflecting on the present moment can be challenging. Can we still consider how far we have come and where we're headed? Can we find ways to "experience and manifest holiness"? Is there a daily practice that will help "live into liberation and live into Torah"?

Some possible practices for those who find prayer or recitation of psalms helpful, on pages 2 and 7. It might also be of use to look ahead to Shavuot and consider one destination ahead -- page 9. In addition, we are approaching "*Pesach Shenit*" -- "Second Passover" -- an opportunity for re-orienting ourselves anew toward liberation.

Second Passover

Ancient Ritual/Current Custom. The Book of Numbers describes a ritual option for people who were unable to make the proper Passover sacrifice in the month of Nisan. The Torah (Num. 9:9-14) explains that people would need this option if they were A) near a corpse and so ritually impure at the right time, or B) on a long journey at the time. The Mishnah later added that people who were prevented in Nisan from observing for other reasons should observe in Iyar.

Since destruction of the Temple, no one is making a ritual sacrifice, so no one is prevented from doing so. Today, customs of *Pesach Shenit* are minimal: 1) eating a piece of matzah, and 2) NOT reciting *tachanun* -- petitionary prayers which are skipped on special celebratory days....

...Many Jews appreciate a day with shorter prayers and a reason to skip the heavy mood of *tachanun*...

...Still, this is a pretty boring set of customs -- especially for those who don't ordinarily recite *tachanun* and maybe don't have an matzah available, anyway:

But there is comfort in knowing that, millenia ago, our ancestors understood that life happens, that our holiday calendar must shift and be flexible to account for life's events, and that second chances are possible.

-- *For Times Such as These*, p.235

Second Chances. In the best of circumstances, preparing for Passover can overwhelm the holiday itself. Trying to arrange kosher-for-Passover food, gathering items for the seder, selecting text to read -- can all seem like additional burdens, instead of pathways to experiencing liberation. If we are alone for the festival and/or don't have resources to enliven the observance, Passover can seem like a long week without much to celebrate.

Matir Asurim has heard from several inside members whose Passover observances were thwarted by lack of decent food and ritual items. Observing Second Passover will not make up for a disappointing original holiday. But it does offer an opportunity to make new preparations and try again to capture some Passover spirit.

With fewer expectations and pressures, the more low-key Second Passover can provide a chance to re-focus on the holiday themes. And then to return to the questions raised above in "Welcome to Iyar" and look again toward the journey beyond.

Conditions that resulted in a less-than-satisfying Passover need attention. At the same time, we know that "life happens." Perhaps a holiday built on the idea of second chances can help us honor the messiness of our attempts at liberation -- as individuals and as a society.

TORAH EXPLORATIONS: Omer and Psalm 67 (again)

As noted in last month's *Divrei Matir Asurim*, Psalm 67 is associated with the period of the Omer, between Passover and Shavuot. One reason is structural: the psalm has seven verses, not counting the introductory line. It also has 49 words in Hebrew, again, not counting the introduction. So, it matches the Omer's seven weeks and 49 days.

In addition, its themes are spring and harvest. This also matches the season.

Last month, *Divrei Matir Asurim* included the Jewish Publication Society translation (from 1917).

Here is a different translation, which comes from Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi z"l and the Open Siddur Project.

Rabbi Dr. Zalman Meshullam Schachter-Shalomi, known as "Reb Zalman" (28 August 1924 – 3 July 2014), was one of the founders of the Jewish Renewal movement....In September 2009, he became the first contributor of a siddur to the Open Siddur Project database of Jewish liturgy and related work.

Psalm 67 -- A Psalm for All People of the Planet

(1) [For the leader; with instrumental music. A psalm. A song
-- from JPS 1917; Reb Zalman leaves this blank]

(2) God, bless us with grace! Let Your loving Face shine on us!

(3) We want to get to know Your way Here on Earth,
Seeing how Your help is given to every group of people.

(4) Oh, how the various peoples will thank You, All of them will sing and be grateful.

(5) Many people will be joyous and sing
When You will set them right with forthrightness.
And the peoples, as You direct them, will cheer You.

(6) Oh, how the various peoples will thank You. All of them will sing, be grateful.

(7) The Earth will give her harvest.
Such blessings come from God. Yes, from our God!

(8) Bless us God,
All the ends of the Earth will esteem You!

Reb Zalman's English translation was first published in *Siddur Tehillat Hashem Yidaber Pi: As I Can Say It* (2009). It appears in Open Siddur Project with Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike (CC-BY-SA) license, meaning material can be shared with notice of author and origin and any future sharing must do the same.

TORAH EXPLORATIONS: Ahead toward Shavuot

A few words from Matir Asurim Shavuot mailing 2022

From the Introduction

On Shavuot we celebrate receiving our Torah. The Torah is our creation story. We chant it out loud each week together in our communities,, repeating the sacred stories over and over. These stories become a part of us, we can see ourselves in them, ground ourselves in their layered, powerful lessons. At times we might question these stories, grapple with them, feel comforted by them – as Jews, the mightiness of Torah permeates each of our lives in countless ways. In this mailing, we have included reflections, poetry, and teachings about Shavuot. Please know that while you read these words, we are celebrating alongside you, remembering that Torah exists on the page and it also exists inside each one of us. Here is to another year of celebrating the miracle of Torah in all of its depth and complexity and to the profound ways it connects us to one another.

We are looking forward to connecting with you, and, together, embodying the Jewish value and visioning a world where all are free. -- from the Matir Asurim team

GOD QUEERS THE MOUNTAIN -- by Rabbi Mónica Gomery

The last time I taught the story about the mountain, I tented my fingers into a mountain. See what I did there? and people laughed, then leaned closer, to consider the base of the mountain, thumb touching thumb, or to consider the peak where my fingers rested triangularly together. In the story, God raises the mountain over the people, either lifting it to hover or flipping it by inverting the triangle, plunging the heavenly peak toward the earth.

To be a human being is to walk that bridge slung between what is mortal and what is sky.

We call that story “Mountain Like Cask” or “Mountain Like Rooftop” or “The Threat of the Law.” But I’m thinking let’s call it God Queers the Mountain. Master of Inversions, insisting the world is capable of being in ways we never saw coming.

One student says, If God flipped the mountain, then something is falling off of the mountain toward the people. This had never occurred to me, and now I imagine the landslide of rocks, branches and scripture, pouring down the face of the upside-down mountain at the people who stand there and tremble, try to keep their palms open.

To be a human being is to encounter debris.

To be human is to keep breathing as the gifts and the threats of the mountain hurl toward you.

At the reading, the trans novelist talks about rewriting Norse and Greek myths. Someone asks what is it about the mythic and fabulist that so populates the queer imagination? Someone else responds archetypes, belonging, new roots. Later that night a friend asks me, Why did it feel like it mattered so much when you made the mountain with your hands?

We are slung to the mountain. When it flips we flip, when it trembles we tremble. When it takes a new body, when it transforms its shape. When it is lonely, or stable, or wise.

To be queer means to listen for the stories of ancestors and find yourself stacked up against trees, boulders, breathing the breath of the mountain, the inverted mountain.

TORAH EXPLORATIONS: Lag B'Omer

The entire period of counting the Omer is considered one of semi-mourning by many Jews. Music, dancing, weddings, and many forms of pleasure are avoided during this period -- with a shift, beginning on the 33rd Day, which is called "*Lag B'omer*." For some Jews, the shift is only temporary, with semi-mourning lifted just for *Lag B'omer*. For others, it is lifted for the remaining 17 days.

Many teachings in Judaism include number-word-play, called "*gematria*." Here is one story based on gematria for *Lag B'omer* which offers some food for thought.

Hebrew Numerals and Lag B'Omer:

In Hebrew, letters serve as numerals --

ג = *gimmel* = 3

ל = *lamed* = 30

ג + ל = *lamed + gimmel* = 33, pronounced "*lag*"

32 = לב [*lamed + bet*, 30 + 2]

can be read as "*lev*," meaning "heart"

17 = טוב [*tet vav bet*, 10 + 5 + 2]

can be read as "*tov*," meaning "good"

49 = 32 + 17 = "*lev tov*" or "good heart"

The Omer's 49 days lead to a "good heart" in preparation for receiving the Torah on Shavuot. Note that the first 32 days have "heart," but "good" is not added until the last 17 days.

"Good Heart" and Respect

Rabbi Akiva is an important figure in Jewish tradition. He was most active between the destruction of the Temple (70 CE) and the Bar Kochba Rebellion (132 CE). He also appears in the related discussion on p.4 above of "love your neighbor as yourself."

In this story, Rabbi Akiva has 12,000 pairs of students. "They all died in one period because they did not treat one another with respect." And they all died in the period between Passover and Shavuot. (Babylonian Talmud Yevamot 62b)

Later tradition linked this story with the customs of mourning and then lifting the mourning in the Omer.

A study partnership is an important relationship in Jewish tradition. Linking student deaths to disrespect makes a strong statement about how the pairs of students failed one another.

In addition, the head of a study house is responsible for all the students, so Rabbi Akiva should have noticed that something was wrong. How did he miss the trouble? Some teachers suggest that the student pairs acted like things were well, apparently learning from one another, while harboring disrespect in their hearts.

This brings the story back to the gematria about a "good heart." For the first 32 days, while the death continued, Rabbi Akiva's students might have had "heart," but it was not "good." Without respect for one another, the pairs of students were doomed.

Another Akiva Story

Over the centuries, teachers have tried to explain what went wrong with Rabbi Akiva and his students. Some look for symbolism in the number: Could Rabbi Akiva have had 24,000 students? Is the large number related to Rabbi Akiva's support for the Bar Kokhba Rebellion against the Romans? Maybe this story is hinting at the disaster for the Jewish population that followed that military action.

Rabbi Avi Orlow brings in another part of Rabbi Akiva's story -- Rabbi Akiva and his wife lived apart for many years, so that he could learn in Jerusalem, while she maintained their home in the countryside:

While living apart from his wife all those years, Rabbi Akiva did not show his students the daily habits of respect. How were his students to learn how to treat each other with respect if Rabbi Akiva did not model this for them?

-- Rabbi Avi Orlow, "Modeling Respect on Lag B'Omer" 4/19/2013 on My Jewish Learning

The Talmud says that these students died because they didn't respect one another. It is a strong statement -- in the same spirit as Lev 19:16 suggesting that tale-bearing could lead to murder. Perhaps it also relates to Lev 19:17 about rebuke and "hate in the heart" (above page 4). In any case, this Lag B'Omer story stresses the importance of a "good heart" and respect. The Omer period is a good time to consider and how these values relate to Passover's liberation and Shavuot's giving of the Torah.

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, Kohanim/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.